



NOËSIS

XIX



UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF  
PHILOSOPHY  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



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# NOËSIS



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# **Noēsis XIX**

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# EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

When we began working on this year's edition of Noēsis, our goal was simple: to create a finished product that our authors would be proud to be featured in. We not only aimed to maintain the sterling reputation Noēsis has inherited from previous editors, but to continue to build on their work to make Noēsis an active and recognizable member of undergraduate academia.

We began by overhauling our online presence. Not only did we build a new website from scratch, but we re-imagined and expanded our use of social media. For the first time ever, students could easily submit their papers directly through our website. We created Instagram and Twitter accounts, and put together a Facebook strategy designed to increase engagement.

Our second major innovation was introducing the Winter Edition. In past years, Noēsis had released one call for submissions, and printed one journal comprised of the best of them. However, every year students had completed fantastic philosophical work after our deadline has passed, and had been unable to submit it. To solve that problem, we launched a second edition of the journal, with a later submission deadline and its own editorial staff. We received many truly impressive submissions to the new Winter Edition, and anticipate that it will become an ongoing part of Noēsis' tradition.

Finally, for the first year ever we accepted submissions from students across Canada. This makes us one of only a handful of national undergraduate philosophy journals. We received submissions from universities in British Columbia to Quebec, and were able to introduce our journal to a huge new audience. As a result, our authors can receive the national recognition they deserve, as some of the most promising philosophers of the next generation.

Despite our lofty aspirations, above all else we continue to be an active part of undergraduate life at the University of Toronto. Throughout the year we have organized, advertised and operated events designed to help philosophy students get to know one another and find a sense of community. They included workshops to help students prepare their work for publication, a canned food drive to benefit the Native Women's Resource Centre of Toronto, and our philosophy trivia nights. We are excited to once again launch our journal at the Undergraduate Research Conference in Philosophy, where several of our authors will be presenting their papers.

We are proud to say that our efforts were successful. Not only did we



beat the previous record for the number of submissions to the journal, but we more than doubled it. (It is worth noting we broke the record even when we discounted the papers received from other universities.) Our editorial team worked tirelessly to advertise the journal, especially to students unfamiliar with *Noēsis*. We visited classes, attended events, and sent hundreds of emails (or at least what felt like it). It is our hope that future editors-in-chief will take this as a challenge, and attempt to set the bar even higher.

The first article in this year's Spring Edition is the talented Christopher Yuen's "The Possibility of Authentic Suicide: Mersault as a Model". Yuen contends that while Camus proves that suicide is not always the best option in the face of the absurdity of life, that there are cases in which suicide remains a live and legitimate choice, and indeed must, in order for life to contain meaning. Through experiencing and re-encountering suicide through literature, we are able to conceptualize it as a path we are capable of taking. Rather than providing an argument for the legitimacy of suicide, therefore, literature transfers this knowledge by acting as a demonstration of it.

In perhaps the most ambitious paper of this year's journal, Thomas Benstead argues that Heidegger's ontology presupposes concepts of prior ontologies in "Being-Towards-Aristotle? Heidegger's Implicit Presupposition of Aristotle's Concepts of the Human Being in Being and Time". Benstead sets about dismantling Heidegger's project by arguing that it borrows from Aristotle's conception of the rational animal and the political animal.

We then move to Trung Ngo's "Cooper vs Hadot: On the Nature of Hellenistic Therapeutic Philosophy". Ngo takes on a debate in the analysis of ancient philosophy over what it is for the practice of philosophy to promote living the best life. The paper responds to an objection to Hadot's view leveled by Cooper, and argues that Cooper's view inappropriately constrains the benefits of philosophy to philosophical discourse. As students engaging in philosophy today, Ngo's paper raises interesting questions about the extent to which, and by what mechanisms, philosophy can be considered a way of life.

In "Peter Klein's Infinitism Precludes Justification", Tunç Berk Doğan takes on the project of arguing that Klein must deny or revise his infinitist account of justification. Doğan begins by explicating Klein's infinitist proposition, then goes on to demonstrate that Klein's solution to the Regress Problem is inadequate, before showing that Klein's account precludes justification simpliciter. After considering potential counterarguments, Doğan concludes that in order to avoid this criticism, Klein would have to reject a crucial premise of his theory.

Alexandra Leclair's innovative paper "On Degree Actualism" offers a way of settling the debate in modal metaphysics between Serious Actualism and Possibilism. She suggests that objects can be construed as differing in their degree of 'being'. By redefining serious actualism and possibilism as theses about being, rather than existence, Leclair is able to explain how they are compatible with one another. Her solution offers a preferable account of how such individuals possess properties, and accounts for the intuitions that motivate



both competing views.

In our interview with Professor Thomas Hurka, we discuss the contributions to moral philosophy that won him the prestigious Killam Prize this year. Hurka is a prolific author, most famous for his work defining which things are intrinsically 'good'. We begin by discussing his early work in perfectionism, and how his views have evolved throughout his career. This leads us to explore the writing process that has made him so successful, which he describes as "the tortoise not the hare". With his signature wit and directness, Hurka then explains his perspective on a range of topics, from what time it's appropriate to get up in the morning, to why Aristotle is entirely wrong about ethics, and the increasingly technical nature of his field.

As we complete this project we have spent almost a year preparing for, we are incredibly grateful to all the many people who make our journal possible. We would not have been able to do any of this without the assistance of the Department of Philosophy. We are particularly indebted to Eric Correia, the Undergraduate Administrator, who has been a constant pillar of support. Whether we needed a last-minute room booking, or an obscure budget question answered, his door has been open.

We would also like to thank Adam Murray and Matt Armstrong for their help type-setting the journal, as well as their ongoing encouragement and advice. In addition, we would like to thank both Adam Murray and Belinda Piercy for their work organizing the Undergraduate Research Conference in Philosophy, at which we are launching our journal.

Noësis received financial support from a number of institutions this year, including the Department of Philosophy, University College, Trinity College, Innis College, the Association of Part Time Students (APUS), and the Arts and Sciences Student Union (ASSU). It is thanks to their donations that we are able to print our journal and fund our events, and for that reason we are deeply grateful to them.

We owe our beautiful cover to Alex Lui, who was kind enough to design it for the second year running.

Finally, we would like to thank our editorial team for their relentless work ethic, and the passion they brought to their positions.

Sincerely yours,

Lucas Bennett  
Sheridan Cunningham



EDITORS - IN - CHIEF

NOËSIS

UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY





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## NOĒSIS XIX

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# THE POSSIBILITY OF AUTHENTIC SUICIDE: MEURSAULT AS A MODEL

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CHRISTOPHER YUEN

In this paper, I contend that the question of suicide is one worth attending to because only by considering its possibility can we give value to life. To this end I read Camus' *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a pair in considering the question: Can we commit suicide? Our answer to this question is concerned both with its possibility as a genuine choice, and our ability to justify suicide as a course of action. Making a genuine choice requires options, although the nature of suicide is inherently self-limiting. To this end literature presents itself as an alternative means of encountering suicide, through its ability to overcome absence and its intrinsically reflective nature. Furthermore, although suicide seems irrational to beings that have chosen life, literature presents a way of convincing that succeeds not through rational argument, but rather by demonstration. Literature thus presents us both with the possibility of suicide, and a means of justifying it, although it will be up to us to engage with them. All of this is not to say that literature is the only means of encountering suicide, but simply a particularly fruitful one. Having once encountered it, the possibility of suicide constitutes a background condition to our lives, one that is omnipresent if only we attend to it. The possibility that we may value life is, *ipso facto*, the possibility that we may value death, and so suicide must in principle be a legitimate choice, even if it is one that we do not make.

**Key Words:** Camus, suicide, literature, choice, possibility, meaning

## 1 CAN THE CHOICE OF SUICIDE BE LEGITIMATE?

In this paper I will explore the legitimacy of suicide, and the possibility of using literature both to encounter and to justify it. Much of the current debate concerning suicide is ethical, and it is often framed as a mental health crisis



and thus a problem for psychology or medicine. It seems *prima facie* accepted that we should not commit suicide, with our mental health services and suicide hotlines in place to prevent it. However, this ethical response presupposes a philosophical answer to the question of suicide's legitimacy, one that I believe bears re-evaluation. It is to this decidedly modern shift in the discourse around suicide that this paper is addressed. As such, it is concerned neither with honor societies in which acts of ritual suicide might be considered honorable, nor with the Judeo-Christian tradition of suicide as a sin against God (Cholbi, 2017). The goal is simply a discussion of suicide's moral permissibility in a value-neutral way. The following discussion is also independent of Hume's utilitarian considerations (Cholbi, 2017), although it does presuppose some notion of fundamental freedoms insofar as they make choice possible. The suggestion here is simply that we evaluate, seriously and without bias, the possibility of suicide and the reasons we may have for it, whatever they may turn out to be. Our reasons should shape our answers and not vice versa. If our predetermined answers shaped our supposed reasons, then they become only excuses.

To this end I will be reading Camus' *The Outsider* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a pair. Camus' answer to the "one truly serious philosophical problem" (Camus, 1955, p.3) of suicide is given in the preface to *The Myth of Sisyphus*: that suicide is not legitimate because "even within the limits of nihilism it is possible to find the means to proceed beyond nihilism" (Camus, 1955). This is to say that the absurdity of man's place in the world, and our recognition of such absurdity, does not logically necessitate suicide. The absurdity stems, as Julian Young discusses in his book, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, from our desire for grand-narrative meaning in life, and the "evident failure of reality to provide such meaning" (Young, 2014, p.162). The rest of *The Myth of Sisyphus* is dedicated to showing that the absurdity of life does not entail its worthlessness, and therefore suicide on our part. However, to say that it is possible for us to proceed beyond nihilism is not to say that it is necessary that we do so. Camus' proclamation that "suicide is not legitimate" (Camus, 1955) therefore seems premature, for he already appears to presuppose that we should want to live, if only we could find a way to do so in spite of life's absurdity. Yet all he has shown is that suicide is not necessitated by life's absurdity. Camus therefore answers the question, "Must we commit suicide?" but leaves open the answer to the more general question of, "Can we commit suicide?"

In posing the question above, I apply the use of what might be called a choice model to the question of suicide. I presuppose, in the existentialist tradition of radical free choice, that suicide can in fact be a choice. It is only on this basis that the subsequent question of legitimacy arises. I grant that the following will prove unpersuasive to those who disagree with this fundamental presupposition, perhaps because in certain cases, suicide might not seem like a choice at all. I believe such cases encounter the converse of the problem that is here addressed: the depressive suicide does not see life as a choice, just as the people addressed herein might not see suicide as a choice. Thus,

the prescription for the depressive suicide would not be to read Camus' *The Outsider*, whose perspective they already inhabit, but perhaps Coelho's *The Alchemist* instead. It is precisely this broadening of perspective that underpins the possibility of our making a choice. I do not thereby deny the legitimacy of circumstances in which suicide might not seem like a choice at all. But the fact that suicide is not always a choice does not mean that it never is. My target audience is only those who will grant that the choice is possible, but who deny its legitimacy. This, I hope, circumscribes my project appropriately. It makes a relatively modest claim that, in some cases, suicide is a choice, and as a subset of those cases, that choice can be legitimate. It denies the moral absolutism that often characterizes the debate and claims only that the legitimacy of suicide must remain at least possible.

With this background in mind, the question of legitimacy has two aspects. Firstly, is it possible for us to commit suicide? The sense of possibility under consideration is neither logical nor metaphysical, for it is readily apparent that, should we so choose, we may in fact end our own lives. Instead, I am speaking of the practical possibility under which suicide may become a genuine choice for us, which requires that we be presented with the option of suicide. Secondly, could we be justified in committing suicide? Certainly some people may, as Camus suggests, embrace the absurdity of life and live, but could others, faced with the same dilemma, confront life's absurdity and justifiably choose death? To this end we are trying to convince another that suicide could be the 'right' course of action. Under consideration here are not the justifications *per se*, but rather the possibility of giving any kind of justification for suicide. In this paper I will argue that literature can prove helpful in addressing both the problems of possibility and justifiability laid out above.

## 2 THE FORM AND CONTENT OF LITERATURE

Before delving into the two problems of possibility and justifiability, it is worth pausing to consider the ways in which the form and content of literature is particularly well suited to engage with the problem of suicide. Firstly, the novel persists in our world to tell the story of the suicide *post factum*. Secondly, because it is a narrative about someone else, it also gives us the distance necessary to objectively evaluate the choices being made. Lastly, the novel focuses our attention on one particular aspect of life that might otherwise pass without remark or consideration. Concerned as I am with Camus' novel in particular, in speaking of literature I will be speaking primarily of novels, and will often use the terms interchangeably. Nevertheless, I intend what is said here to apply more generally to other forms of literature, in either prose or verse.

As an artifact of our world, Camus' novel persists even through Meursault's suicide in the world of *The Outsider*. The novel ends, as it must, just before Meursault's execution (Camus, 1984, p.122-3). Told as it is from his point of view, with its subjective first-person narration, there is simply nothing more after his death. Although as far as Meursault is concerned, the world of



the novel has ended, the novel persists and so it can continue to tell its story. Ironically enough, Meursault ‘lives’, in spite of his suicide, and dies again, as *The Outsider* is read and re-read. Thus, we may encounter his suicide repeatedly, and by the same token, other people, at different times and in different places, may likewise encounter his suicide. Meursault’s choice of suicide in the novel is not, like the real-world suicide, a self-limiting option; because the novel persists, so too does the act of suicide within it. In this way, the existential novel is able to overcome the absence of the suicide after death, thereby granting us cognitive access to its possibility as a genuine choice.

Moreover, the novel, insofar as it is someone else’s story, also allows us to abstract away from our own lives to consider the actions therein without personal bias. As Martha Nussbaum suggests in *Love’s Knowledge*, “A novel, just because it is not our life... shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life” (Camus, 1984, p.162). In offering a perspective that is not our own, the novel allows us to assess the actions taken therein objectively, and perhaps even to consider them for ourselves. Insofar as Meursault makes a choice that we are all in principle capable of making, his choice represents a genuine possibility for us even beyond the world of the novel that he inhabits. As Nussbaum says in *Love’s Knowledge*, “there is no better way to show one’s commitment to the fine possibilities of the actual than to create, in imagination, their actualization” (Nussbaum, 2009, p.165). By actualizing suicide through Meursault, Camus likewise actualizes its possibility as a genuine choice for us. A similar point is made by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, wherein he says concerning poetry,

the distinction between the historian and the poet is not whether they give their accounts in verse or prose the [real] difference is this: that the one [i.e. the historian] tells what happened, and the other [i.e., the poet] [tells] the sort of things that can happen (Aristotle, 1997, p.81).

Camus is, in Aristotle’s sense, a poet. Meursault might best be understood as an example, one who shows us first-hand what it would be like to commit suicide, and in so doing expands our moral imagination to include its possibility. What has been said here about the nature of literature pertains primarily to its form, as opposed to its content. All literature partakes in this form, but not all literature draws our attention to suicide. Whether or not the story being told does so will depend, by and large, upon its content. This is what differentiates the existential novel from literature in general. As a crafted work, the form of all literature is intrinsically reflective; it focuses our attention upon particular interactions and experiences that the author has deliberately chosen. In her essay, “‘Finely Aware and Richly Responsible’: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature”, Martha Nussbaum discusses the role of literature in focusing our ‘moral attention’ on matters of moral significance (Nussbaum, 2009, p.153-4). Immersed as we are in our own lives, many interactions pass without conscious notice. Even when we do take note of significant interactions, we

often forget them amidst the bustle of everyday life. What literature does is it forces us to pause upon particular experiences and helps us to overcome the limitations of our own attention. The content upon which the novel focuses our attention is up to the author, and in the case of *The Outsider*, it shines a spotlight upon the question of suicide. In reading it we encounter the question, just as Meursault does.

Before we proceed, one final clarificatory point is in order. The forgoing is not to suggest that literature is the only means by which we may encounter the question of suicide, or even that it is the most productive means. One may, for example, speak to a suicide before their death, or to one who has attempted suicide, both of which might leave a far deeper impression than a casual reading of *The Outsider* is capable. However, such encounters necessarily face their own constraints in light of suicide's self-limiting nature. Life afterwards moves on. We get caught up amidst the oncoming rush of living our everyday lives as we confront, every second of every day, the overwhelming abundance of life; not just our own particular lives, but also the infinite other lives lived by the other people whom we encounter. This constant affirmation of life, in all its myriad forms, crowds out the possibility of suicide. Thus, the suggestion here is only that the novel is a particularly fruitful way of encountering suicide, although it is by no means the only way.

### 3 THE PROBLEM OF POSSIBILITY

The first difficulty in questioning the legitimacy of suicide is how we may come to recognize it as an option that is in fact open to us. Genuine choice requires options, and so we must be presented with the possibility of suicide in order for it to be practically possible. Imagine your experience in a local Chinatown restaurant. The menu is sometimes literally, and quite unhelpfully, translated; you wonder what "Buddha Jumps Over the Wall" is supposed to be; and perhaps you resort, more often than not, to the pictures on the menu when deciding what to order.

Now, not only is the menu unhelpful, it is also incomplete. If you happen to speak Cantonese, or Mandarin as the case may be, a whole new world of options opens up to you. If you know what to ask for, you can get combinations and dishes that were never on the menu to begin with. The only problem is, how do you come to know about these options? They exist, and can be ordered, if only you had known about them.

Analogously, our ordinary, everyday experience, because it is experience of and with existent beings, seldom if ever presents us with the possibility of suicide. We simply have no way of encountering non-being, or those that have chosen suicide, which makes it an inherently self-limiting choice. Thus, there is a positive survivorship bias in our experience of life. We see only the various lives that we could lead, because every model of authenticity that we have, in virtue of being a model that is present to us, is one that exists. The most fundamental choice of 'life or death' has already been made, and the answer



appears always in the affirmative. What is presented to us is only ‘life or life’, which is not a genuine choice, but rather a false dichotomy. We see only the infinite possibilities of life presented to us: the life of a lawyer, doctor, soldier, or sportsman, but always life of some sort; and in its infinitude life excludes the possibility of choosing death. Yet the set of possibilities that are open to us is in fact one option greater than the set of possibilities circumscribed by life, for it contains the option of suicide. And this option is always present, even if we are unaware of it, because it remains in principle logically and metaphysically possible. How then could we come to recognize suicide as a genuine choice?

In Camus’ *The Outsider*, I believe one solution is being presented. Through the use of literature, we may come to recognize other possibilities that could be open to us, including but not limited to suicide. In her book, *The Realistic Spirit*, Cora Diamond proposes the use of literature to enlarge the moral imagination that shows us, “with imaginative force” (Diamond, 1995, p.294), alternative perspectives from which we may view the world. She cites Dickens’ *David Copperfield* and Wordsworth’s “The Old Cumberland Beggar” as examples that give us cognitive access to hitherto unconsidered and therefore cognitively inaccessible perspectives. The enlargement of our moral imagination therefore increases the perspectives to which we have cognitive access, insofar as we may now imagine those perspectives, and so recognize them as being possibilities that are in principle open to us. We may disagree with his choice, but we are nevertheless forced to contemplate the possibility of suicide, and Meursault’s reasons for it. In this way, literature is able to overcome the self-limiting nature of suicide to present us with its possibility.

## 4 THE PROBLEM OF JUSTIFICATION

Even if we can gain cognitive access to the possibility of suicide, the question remains if we can justify it. And in asking if we can justify suicide, we are not asking about the justifications themselves that are being offered, but rather the possibility of giving any kind of justification for suicide. What are we doing when we try to justify suicide, or any other action? We are trying to *convince* someone else of our point of view, that we should have chosen that particular course of action. Most of the time, this convincing is done through rational argument. Thus, to say that we are justified in pursuing a course of action is just to say that we can argue for it in such a way that explains why we did what we did.

However, in the case of suicide, the societal valuation of life makes it appear irrational, and therefore unjustifiable, because everything that we encounter in everyday life is necessarily existent. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Existentialism is a Humanism*, he puts forth the notion that we instantiate the value of the things that we choose, in virtue of having chosen them (Sartre, 2007, p.32). If I were to ask someone to choose between five different cakes, the one that he considers to be the best will naturally be the one that he chooses; otherwise he would have chosen differently. It would be irrational for us to make

a sub-optimal choice, knowing that it was sub-optimal. By parity of reason, all beings that do not value life instantiate this value judgment by choosing suicide. Having thus become non-being, they are no longer present for us to encounter. We may therefore genuinely exhort life but not death, because only those who value life remain present to us to do so, and to these existent beings suicide necessarily appears irrational. To them, there is no justification possible for an act that ends all justification.

In this regard, justification for suicide appears circumscribed by rational argument, and this is often very persuasive. It is, after all, the bulk of what we do in philosophy. And the persuasive power of rational argument arises because to reject the conclusion of a sound argument, assuming that it is in fact sound, is in some sense to reject logic itself. Either that, or we admit to being incapable of following the argument's inferential structure. But rational argument need not be the only way to convince someone. In her book, *The Realistic Spirit*, Cora Diamond suggests that literature not only passively presents us with alternative points of view, but in fact works actively to convince us of them (Diamond, 1995, p.292-3). The narrative demonstration, although not an argument, is more than mere assertion. *The Outsider* does not just state that Meursault did commit suicide, but also that he *should* have done so; that given his circumstance suicide was the right thing to do. What persuades is more than the objective fact being presented, but also the style and form of the narrative. By allowing us to inhabit the subjective perspective of another, which would otherwise be inaccessible to us, the narrative is capable of eliciting emotion that enables empathy rather than sympathy. It is therefore not just an assertion about the perspective shown but also a means of convincing someone else. Despite the lack of appeal to rational argument, the act of suicide may nevertheless be justified by demonstration.

However, this is just to say that the act of suicide could be justified, but not that it need be. Unsurprisingly, not everyone who reads *The Outsider* will be convinced, nor would it be realistic to expect them to be. No novel, no matter how persuasive, will succeed in convincing everyone, just as no argument, no matter how sound, will convince everyone. However, to reject an argument and to reject a demonstration both entail a cost. In the former, we admit to an incapacity to follow the argument's valid inferential structure, whereas in the latter we admit to a limited moral imagination. Someone who rejects an argument could simply be obstinate enough to deny its conclusion, despite conceding both to its inferential structure and to the truth of its premises. Similarly, those possessed of an imagination incapable of sufficiently fine feeling may nevertheless read the novel and ignore, or prove incapable of grasping, its message. Unlike argument that appeals to reason, demonstration's appeal is to emotion. Moreover, just as one could reasonably reject an argument for having false premises or deny the inference from premise to conclusion, so too may one reject a demonstration for being insufficiently persuasive. However, even if the reader is not convinced, there is still a concession that some kind of justification is being given, and therefore that justification is in principle



possible.

Even the potential of giving such justification through demonstration requires an openness to its possibility that not everyone will concede. Those who believe that justification can only occur through rational argument will not be convinced by Diamond's suggestion, and it is admittedly only a suggestion. However, there is likewise no reason to suppose that rational argument is the only means of justification. We are rational creatures, but not wholly rational automata. If the purpose of justification is to convince, then an appeal to emotion can be just as persuasive as an appeal to reason, perhaps even more so. There is, and should be, something to be said for literature's, and art and music's, ability to move and thereby persuade us. Not all works are created equal, and not everyone who reads *The Outsider* will be convinced that suicide is a justifiable choice. Nevertheless, justification is being given, and in reading *The Outsider* we are forced to confront its possibility; whether or not we accept it is up to us.

## 5 WHY QUESTION THE LEGITIMACY OF SUICIDE?

Even if all of the foregoing is granted, one final question remains: Why should we question the legitimacy of suicide? Why not accept society's *prima facie* judgment that suicide is immoral, and simply live our lives? In fact, the recognition of suicide as a genuine option is often called "suicidal ideation", and it is seen as a condition to be treated, not something to be encouraged.

My suggestion here is that it ultimately boils down to choice. Without the option of suicide, we cannot truly give value to life because it is only by considering the possibility of suicide, and rejecting it, that we can value life by choosing it for its own sake. When we are faced with a choice between two lives, what we affirm with value in our choice is not life itself, which is common to both options, but the difference between them. This not only means that we are "condemned to be free," in Sartre's words (Sartre, 2007, p.29), but also that we are condemned to life. Without the possibility of suicide, we would live only by *fiat*; we would be alive not by choice, but from the sheer fact that we are alive. The relevant question then becomes, "Do I have a reason to die?" instead of, "Do I have a reason to live?" And this perhaps should not be good enough. We ought to have a positive reason to live, above and beyond the mere absence of any reason to die. And if we do choose to live, why we do so matters less than the choice that we make; regardless of whether we choose to live for the sake of family, friends or the beauty of a sunrise, we *chose* life, and that gives it value.

What then of those who confront the choice of suicide, but rather than affirm life, choose death? I am here compelled to concede that the choice of suicide, having been made freely, must be an acceptable one. If suicide is to be a genuine choice, then the one who chooses suicide must be able to affirm that his particular life, and not necessarily life in general, is not worth living. Recognizing, as Camus does, the absurdity of our lives, life is meaningless



but not necessarily valueless (Camus, 1955, p.55). Instead, the value of any particular life can be judged only by the one who lives it, and the possibility must be open that he decides it is not worth living. The choice of suicide is no less valid than its converse that affirms life, and the possibility that allows us to value life likewise requires that we cede to the possibility that someone may choose to value death. To light a candle is to cast a shadow, and in denying the value of suicide we necessarily also deny the value of life.

We should confront the possibility of suicide because it enables us to give value to life, not just for ourselves, but also for all people. Will there be those who would prefer to avoid such a confrontation? Naturally, but that does not change the fact that they should. This, then, constitutes a moral claim: All of us ought to confront the possibility of suicide, that we may either judge life not worth living and hence commit suicide, or judge it worthwhile and through our choice give it the only value possible.

## 6 SUICIDE AS A BACKGROUND CONDITION

What then does this conception of a valuable life demand of us, as agents in the world? Must we contemplate the possibility of suicide with every choice that we make? Given the fleeting nature of our attention, to keep constant hold of the possibility of suicide must be to the detriment of all other things. The exhortation to confront suicide as a genuine possibility is simply for us to encounter the notion, pause to consider it, and should we judge life worth living, to carry on with our lives. To this end an existential novel like *The Outsider* is useful, for it crystallizes the transient act of suicide and preserves it for posterity. Having once encountered it, the possibility of suicide becomes more accessible to us the second, third and thirtieth time. Although the possibility of suicide is omnipresent, as a background condition of our lives, we need not attend to it always and all the time. Instead, we may revisit the question as we see fit, having once chosen to live, to see if our reasons stand up to the test of time. At that time, our reasons might be the same, or we might have different reasons, or perhaps by then, no reason at all.

What has been suggested in this paper is simply that the question of suicide, in order to be treated ethically, must first be considered philosophically. I have offered reason to think that confronting the question of suicide is worthwhile, and that is a particularly fruitful method of inquiry, albeit not to the exclusion of other means. As Camus makes clear in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the question of suicide is worth asking because of its relation to meaning-giving in our lives (Camus, 1955, p.6). I have no doubt that some will find the amoral nature of the choice unpalatable, because it grants that suicide must be permissible, but that is a price I consider worth paying. Such a view requires much presumption on my part, both in the ability of choice to confer value and in the capacity of literature to justify through demonstration; to this end I have borrowed liberally from both Sartre and Diamond. Yet if these are granted, I believe that the conclusion follows as a natural consequence. All who have

paused to contemplate the question of suicide, and who nevertheless remain, may value life in and of itself, and their lives may prove all the richer for it.

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## NOĒSIS XIX

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# BEING TOWARDS ARISTOTLE? HEIDEGGER'S IMPLICIT PRESUPPOSITION OF ARISTOTLE'S CONCEPTS OF THE HUMAN BEING IN BEING AND TIME

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THOMAS BENSTEAD

Richard Rorty hails Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* as "powerful and original": the author of this paper seeks to scrutinize the latter claim. Heidegger starts his chef-d'oeuvre by aiming to distance himself from the ontology of prior philosophers, and so he investigates the Question of Being through "Dasein." The author argues that Heidegger's concept of "Dasein" presupposes within itself the concept of Aristotle's "Rational Animal," which accordingly prevents Heidegger from actually separating his ontology from prior ontologies. The author's assertion of a presupposition of "Rational Animal" within "Dasein" is supported not only by Heidegger's familiarity with Aristotelian thought, but also that the key feature of "Dasein" (i.e. inquiry) necessitates a sort of rational capacity. Moreover, the author seeks to demonstrate that the presupposition of "Rational Animal" within "Dasein" results in a sustained Aristotelian influence within Heidegger's work, such that Heidegger's concept of the "They" resembles Aristotle's "Political Animal."

**Key Words:** Heidegger, Aristotle, Dasein, rational animal, political animal, inquiry

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, he aims to create an ontology separate from the ontologies of Plato and Aristotle in order to answer the question of Being: he examines the nature of Being from the perspective of "Dasein" (i.e. the human being). I will demonstrate that in doing so, Heidegger implicitly presupposes the Aristotelian concepts of the human being within his work, meaning



that he does not actually establish an ontology separate from prior ontologies as he aims to do. Specifically, I seek first to demonstrate that Heidegger's conception of "Dasein" presupposes within itself the concept of Aristotle's "Rational Animal"; I then seek to further demonstrate how this initial Aristotelian concept, within the lens with which Heidegger understands Being, influences Heidegger's concept of the "They" to resemble Aristotle's "Political Animal."

My paper is organized as follows. First, I will explain Heidegger's philosophy regarding his formulation of a new ontology, the respective concepts of "Dasein" and the "They," and his explicit rejection of prior concepts of the human being. Second, I will briefly summarize Aristotle's concepts of the human being as "Rational Animal" and "Political Animal." Third, I will demonstrate how Heidegger's "Dasein" presupposes Aristotle's "Rational Animal," and how this initial Aristotelian presupposition leads Heidegger's "They" to resemble Aristotle's "Political Animal," thereby demonstrating a sustained Aristotelian influence within Heidegger in opposition to what Heidegger claims. Fourth, I will acknowledge and respond to potential objections that other people could raise against my argument.

## 2 HEIDEGGER'S "DASEIN" AS PART OF HIS "FUNDAMENTAL ONTOLOGY"

I will structure my exegesis of Heidegger in four parts: first, Heidegger's stated goal for *Being and Time*; second, "Dasein" as the key to Heidegger's "Fundamental Ontology"; third, how "Dasein" interacts with the "They"; fourth, Heidegger on prior concepts of the human being.

### 2.1 Heidegger's "Fundamental Ontology"

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger entitles his project "fundamental ontology"; he aims to explore ontology—i.e. "the [study] of being as such" (van Inwagen and Sullivan, 2017)—because he asserts that "[The Question of Being] has been forgotten" (Heidegger, 1927, p.21). He argues that, based on Plato and Aristotle's "initial contributions towards [ontology], a dogma has developed which not only declares the meaning of Being to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect" (Heidegger, 1927, p.21), thus discouraging any further study of Being. Taylor Carman, in his foreword to a 2008 publication of *Being and Time*, elaborates on what exactly Heidegger means by the "dogma" in ontology from Plato onwards:

Since Plato, however, philosophers have systematically neglected the question of being—the question of what it means *to be*—in favour of inquiries into the kinds of entities there are: their basic character, their distinguishing features, their essential properties... These various inventories of the 'furniture of the world'

[as opposed to the Question of Being] are the stuff of traditional ontology, from Plato to Hegel (Carman, 2008, p.xiv)

The prejudices that make up said “dogma,” according to Heidegger, “are rooted in ancient [Greek] ontology itself, and it will not be possible to interpret that ontology adequately until the question of Being has been clarified and answered” (Heidegger, 1927, p.22). Carman explains that the reason for this is that “traditional ontology presupposes a more ‘fundamental ontology’” (Carman, 2008, p.xv)—hence the name Heidegger gives to his project. As a result, Heidegger’s “Fundamental Ontology” cannot and will not involve any prior ontology (such as Aristotle’s ontology) until after Heidegger has answered the Question of Being. As a result, Heidegger thus aims for his ontology to be distinct and separate from prior ontologies such as Aristotle’s. I will argue in section 3 that regardless of Heidegger’s aims, he actually relies on Aristotle’s philosophy for significant ontological concepts; instead of traditional ontology relying on “Fundamental Ontology” (Carman, 2008, p.xv), I argue that the reverse is true. Heidegger then sets his sights on returning to ontology, yet he claims that “if [the question of Being] is to be revived... we must first work out an adequate way of formulating it” (Heidegger, 1927, p.24).

## 2.2 Heidegger on “Dasein”

In order to investigate Being, Heidegger asserts that “to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being” (Heidegger, 1927, p.27). What Heidegger means is that a particular entity must first be aware that it exists before it can question Being. More importantly, he posits that this entity must first be able to inquire: “[t]his entity which *each of us is himself* and which *includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being*, we shall denote by the term ‘Dasein’” (Heidegger, 1927, p.27, emphasis mine). So, “Dasein” is the label that Heidegger gives to the human being. Hubert L. Dreyfus, in his book *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary of Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I*, says the following about “Dasein”: “The best way to understand what Heidegger means by Dasein is to think of our term ‘human being,’ which can refer to a way of being that is characteristic of all people or to a specific person—a human being... Heidegger is interested in the human way of being, which he calls being-there or Dasein” (Dreyfus, 1991, p.14). Not only must Dasein be able to inquire, according to Heidegger, but it must be able to understand: “Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being” (Dreyfus, 1991, p.32). Accordingly, Dasein is an entity that can inquire into and come to understand Being. Heidegger affirms the importance of Dasein to his ontology: “Therefore, fundamental ontology, from which alone all other ontologies can take their rise, must be sought in the [analysis of the necessary structures of Dasein’s existence]” (Heidegger, 1927, p.34).



### 2.3 Heidegger on the “They”

One of the necessary structures of Dasein’s existence is the “They,” which stems from the prior necessary structures of “Being-in-the-world” and “Being-with”. First, Heidegger notes that “Being-in-the-World in general [is] the basic state of Dasein” (Heidegger, 1927, p.78). In other words, Heidegger posits that Dasein exists within the world by necessity. Next, he asserts that “Being-in-the-world is *Being-with* Others”(Heidegger, 1927, p.155), meaning that every Dasein’s existence in the world is defined in terms of its relationship with other Dasein. Additionally, Heidegger explains that, “By ‘Others’ we do not mean everybody else but me... They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself those among whom one is too” (Heidegger, 1927, p.154), suggesting that a Dasein tends to associate itself with other Dasein more than it disassociates itself with other Dasein. Dasein’s standard interaction with Others culminates in what Heidegger calls the “They”:

Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in *subjection*... to Others. It itself *is not*; its Being has been taken away by the Others... These Others, moreover, are not *definite* Others. On the contrary, any Other can represent them. What is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others which has already been taken over unawares from Dasein as Being-with. One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power... The ‘who’ is the neuter, *the ‘they’* (Heidegger, 1927, p.164).

As shown above, there are three central characteristics of Heidegger’s concept of the “They”: first, that Dasein’s general way of relating to others is through the “They”; second, that for Dasein to be part of the “They,” it must subject itself to the “They” so as to diminish its own individual existence; third, that the “They” is not a particular individual or group, but rather an indefinite cohesion of many Dasein—Dasein does not submit itself necessarily to a particular individual (e.g. Mike) or group (e.g. the Athenian citizens), but to other people generally.

### 2.4 Heidegger on Prior Concepts of the Human Being

When starting his analysis of the Being of Dasein, Heidegger first distinguishes the scope of Dasein from prior ideas about the nature of the human being. When contrasting the two, he asserts that “those investigations and formulations of the question which have been aimed at Dasein heretofore, have missed the real *philosophical* problem... and that as long as they persist in missing it, they have no right to assert that they *can* accomplish that for which they are basically striving” (Heidegger, 1927, p.71). In distinguishing Dasein from prior conceptions of the human being, he claims that all prior conceptions (including, presumably, Aristotle’s “Rational Animal”) would be insufficient

to successfully inquire into the Question of Being. Hence Heidegger wants Dasein to be distinct from prior concepts of the human being.

After Heidegger explains his ontology in relation to Dasein, he eventually comes to the conclusion that his fundamental ontology is sufficient to discuss “man” (i.e. the human being), as distinct from Dasein:

In our foregoing Interpretations... everything depended on our arriving at the right *ontological* foundations for that entity which in each case we ourselves are, and which we call “man”. To do this it was necessary from the outset to change the direction of our analysis from the approach presented by the traditional definition of “man”—an approach which has not been clarified ontologically and is in principle questionable (Heidegger, 1927, p.241).

This passage clearly demonstrates that, in his ontological theorizing up until this point in *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims to have purposefully avoided what he refers to as “the traditional definition of ‘man’” (Heidegger, 1927, p.241) due to concerns over sufficient ontological justification. In conjunction with his earlier assertion that it “will not be possible to interpret [Platonic or Aristotelian] ontology adequately until the question of Being has been clarified and answered” (Heidegger, 1927, p.22), it follows that Heidegger claims to avoid “traditional definitions of ‘man’” (Heidegger, 1927, p.241) from prior philosophers, such as Aristotle.

### **3 ARISTOTLE’S CONCEPTS OF THE HUMAN BEING: “RATIONAL ANIMAL” AND “POLITICAL ANIMAL”**

#### **3.1 Heidegger’s Awareness of Aristotle’s Concepts of the Human Being as Canonical**

Speaking of “traditional definitions of ‘man’” (Heidegger, 1927, p.241), Aristotle provides two such definitions that, due to Aristotle’s generally acknowledged canonical status in Western philosophy, are almost certainly the very “traditional definitions” that Heidegger aims to avoid. Additionally, Heidegger likely knew the concept of “Rational Animal” well. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Heidegger’s philosophical development began when he read Brentano and Aristotle, plus the latter’s medieval scholastic interpreters” (Wheeler, 2017). Given that Aristotle’s conception of the human being as a “Rational Animal” (Aristotle I.2.1253a10) continues in medieval Aristotelians such as Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas *ST* I. Q.79. A.8), it is probable that Heidegger would have encountered the conception of the human being as “Rational Animal” when studying Aristotle and the Scholastics. Accordingly, Aristotle’s canonical status and Heidegger’s familiarity with Aristotle and medieval Aristotelians suggests that the “traditional definitio[n] of ‘man’” (Heidegger, 1927, p.241) that Heidegger aims to avoid is none other than Aristotle’s “Rational Animal.



### 3.2 Aristotle's "Rational Animal" and "Political Animal"

In Aristotle's *Politics*, he establishes two interconnected concepts of the human being: The "Rational Animal" and "The Political Animal." The first stems from Aristotle's observations about humans as unique: "a human being is the only animal with rational discourse" (Aristotle I.2.1253a10). Since he claims that only humans have the ability to reason, humans are therefore termed as Rational Animals. The second stems from the first: given that humans are rational, but also social with one another, Aristotle concludes that it "is evident, then that... a human being is by nature a political animal" (I.2.1253a2). In addition to the Political Animal being rational and social, he also claims that for political animals, "the city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually" (I.2.1253a19). Hence Aristotle provides two concepts of humans, as both Rational and Political Animals, wherein the first concept leads to the second.

## 4 HEIDEGGER'S ARISTOTELIAN INFLUENCE

In this section, I will argue Heidegger's *Dasein* presupposes within itself Aristotle's Rational Animal. Moreover, I will argue that since Heidegger's *Dasein* leads into the "They," the resemblance between the "They" and Aristotle's Political Animal is not coincidental but rather evidence of a sustained Aristotelian influence. In doing so, I will ultimately demonstrate that Heidegger sustains key Aristotelian ontological concepts within his own ontology, in spite of his aim to do otherwise.

### 4.1 Heidegger's Noted Reliance on Aristotle

My subsequent reading of Heidegger as deeply reliant on Aristotle is far from unique. To the contrary, much of the secondary literature on Heidegger centres on demonstrating some sort of connection between Heidegger and Aristotle. Thomas J. Sheenan, in his essay "Heidegger, Aristotle, and Phenomenology" asserts that "Aristotle appears directly or indirectly on virtually every page" (Sheenan, 1975, p.87) of *Being and Time*. The entry on Heidegger in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* calls his fundamental ontology "a neo-Aristotelian search for what it is that unites and makes possible our varied and diverse senses of what it is to be" (Wheeler, 2017). William J. Richardson affirms that "Aristotle has influenced [Heidegger] more profoundly than any other thinker" (Richardson, 1964, p.58). While each of these thinkers (myself included) has a different understanding of how exactly Heidegger is influenced by Aristotle, we all share the idea that Heidegger was influenced by Aristotle.

## 4.2 Heidegger's Dasein as Presupposing Aristotle's Rational Animal

I argue that Heidegger's definition of Dasein essentially presupposes within itself Aristotle's Rational Animal. In other words, I argue that one cannot conceive of Heidegger's Dasein without also presupposing that it is also Aristotle's Rational Animal. Recall that Dasein (i.e. the human being) is initially defined in terms of its potential to inquire: "This entity [Dasein] which each of us is himself... includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being" (Heidegger, 1927, p.27). In order to inquire competently, I argue that the inquirer must be capable of rational thought. The general goal of inquiry is to endeavour to find something specific. For example, I can inquire into who ate the bag of chips that I kept on the top shelf. Before I can arrive at an answer to my inquiry, I must be able to discern between a sufficient and an insufficient answer to my inquiry. For example, a sufficient answer to my inquiry would be my father, since he eats chips and can reach the chips on the top shelf; an insufficient answer to my inquiry would be my dog, since he cannot reach the top shelf in order to reach my chips. This sort of pre-discernment requires the use of rational faculties in order to justify why one possible answer is sufficient while another is not. Therefore, inquiry requires the ability to think rationally. Since inquiry requires rational thought, an inquirer must have the potential to think rationally. Dasein is defined by Heidegger as an entity that inquires (Heidegger, 1927, p.27); Aristotle's Rational Animal is "animal with rational discourse" (I.2.1253a10). Thus, in order for a Dasein to inquire, it must also be a Rational Animal. Hence Dasein presupposes within itself Aristotle's Rational Animal.

## 4.3 Heidegger's the "They" as Resembling Aristotle's Political Animal

I will argue that Heidegger's definition of the "They" essentially resembles Aristotle's Political Animal. Recall that the "They" has three key characteristics—for the purposes of this argument, I will focus on the first two, which are encapsulated in the statement that "Dasein, as everyday Being-with-one-another, stands in *subjection*... to Others" (Heidegger, 1927, p.164): first, that the "They" is Dasein's general way of relating to others, thus relating to Being-with; second, that Dasein subjects itself to the "They". These two traits are contained within Aristotle's definition of the Political Animal.

The first trait of the "They," which concerns Dasein's Being-with-others, mirrors Aristotle's declaration that it "is evident, then... that a human being is by nature a political animal" (I.2.1253a2) because humans are both social animals and rational animals. Here, Aristotle's position is similar to Heidegger's conception of "Dasein [as] Being-with-one-another" (Heidegger, 1927, p.164): the latter statement affirms that a part of Dasein's state of existence is that it interacts with others, and the continued use of the word "Dasein"



invokes Heidegger's definition of Dasein as an entity that "includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being" (Heidegger, 1927, p.27), thereby implying rationality (see 3.b.). Both statements emphasize that individual humans/Dasein are entities that are essentially both social and rational. Accordingly, the "They" relies on the first trait of Aristotle's Political Animal.

Moreover, the second trait of the "They," which concerns Dasein's submission to the "They," corresponds to Aristotle's declaration that "the city-state is prior in nature to the household and to each of us individually" (I.2.1253a19). Here, Aristotle's assertion aligns with Heidegger's assertion that Dasein... stands in *subjection*... to Others (Heidegger, 1927, p.164). In both statements, the individual human/Dasein naturally submits to the larger group. Thus, the "They" relies on the second trait of Aristotle's Political Animal. Hence the "They" resembles Aristotle's Political Animal.

Furthermore, I argue that the initial presupposition of the Rational Animal within Heidegger's concept of Dasein is what leads the "They" to resemble the Political Animal. As mentioned in 2, the concept of the Rational Animal must be established prior to the concept of the Political Animal because the former is marked by the power of reason and the latter is marked by the combination of the powers of reason and sociability: the former is an essential part of the latter. Likewise, the concept of Dasein must be established prior to the concept of the "They" because the "They" is primarily a way for Dasein to relate to other Dasein: the former is an essential part of the latter. Thus, there exists a parallel between how Aristotle's concepts connect and how Heidegger's concepts connect. Having already demonstrated how Dasein presupposes within itself the Rational Animal, I contend that both the above parallel and the resemblance between the Political Animal and the "They" are consequences of the initial presupposition of the Rational Animal in the concept of Dasein. If the Rational Animal precedes the Political Animal, and Dasein presupposes within itself the Rational Animal, it follows that Dasein will in turn precede something that resembles the Political Animal, in this case the "They". Hence the initial presupposition of the Rational Animal in Dasein leads the "They" to resemble the Political Animal, and so Heidegger's ontology maintains a sustained Aristotelian influence.

#### 4.4 Effect on Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology

Overall, the effect of Heidegger's Fundamental Ontology having a sustained Aristotelian influence is that he does not accomplish what he aims to do. In other words, I argue Heidegger does not separate his ontology from prior ontologies or metaphysics. Recall that Heidegger claims to have purposefully avoided the traditional definition of 'man'" (Heidegger, 1927, p.241) due to concerns over sufficient ontological justification. Moreover, he asserts that it "will not be possible to interpret [Platonic or Aristotelian] ontology adequately until the question of Being has been clarified and answered" (Heidegger, 1927, p.22). Thus, Heidegger aims to create an ontology that is separate from prior



ontology or metaphysics, especially regarding the human being. Yet I have demonstrated that Heidegger actually maintains a sustained Aristotelian influence through his presupposition of the Rational Animal within the concept of Dasein, and the following resemblance between the “They” and the Political Animal. In doing so, Heidegger is not separating his ontology from prior ontologies or metaphysics. Accordingly, there is a discrepancy between what Heidegger aims to accomplish, and what he actually accomplishes: although he aims to create an ontology separate from prior ontologies or metaphysics, he is actually maintaining a sustained Aristotelian influence throughout his work by implicitly incorporating the concepts of Rational Animal and Political Animal.

## 5 MY RESPONSE TO POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS

In response to what I have outlined above, someone may bring up various objections or counter-arguments against my argument that despite Heidegger’s assertions, he implicitly relies on Aristotle’s concepts of the human being. Below, I will explain and respond to some potential objections in turn.

### 5.1 Potential Objection to my Characterization of Heidegger in regards to Prior Ontology

One could potentially object to my characterization of Heidegger’s attitude towards prior ontology in my exegesis of Heidegger’s *Fundamental Ontology*, asserting that Heidegger actually acknowledges that he borrows largely from prior ontology. One may substantiate their claim by referencing 7 of *Being and Time*, wherein Heidegger draws ontological significance from particular Greek words, such as “*phenomenon*” (Heidegger, 1927, p.51) and “*logos*” (Heidegger, 1927, p.55).

In response to this objection, I do not deny that Heidegger indeed uses hermeneutics to discern meaning from particular Greek words for the purpose of adding to his own ontology. However, I point out that the specific words that Heidegger analyses are not related directly to Aristotle’s philosophical understanding about human nature. Instead, the words that Heidegger analyses are to do with “*phenomenon*” (Heidegger, 1927, p.51) and “*logos*”. Although Heidegger explicitly declares his use of the concepts of *phenomenon* and *logos*, he does not state that he uses Aristotle’s Rational Animal or Political Animal. Moreover, he acknowledges that the conception of *logos* (as he understands it) is distinct from “the later history of the word” (Heidegger, 1927, p.55). Thus, Heidegger’s hermeneutics do not concern Aristotle in the way that I have argued that he is presupposing in his ontology.

Moreover, the way that Heidegger describes his task of hermeneutics applied to ancient Greek words does not imply a reliance on any particular ancient ontology per se. To the contrary, Heidegger justifies his method of hermeneutics as follows:

If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened [ontological] tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved... by taking *the question of Being as our clue*, we are to *destroy* the traditional context of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways which have guided us ever since. (Heidegger, 1927, p.44).

Here, Heidegger wants to get to the root of ontological meaning without relying on prior systems of interpretation, i.e. ontologies and metaphysics. Recall that while he acknowledges that the Greeks may have made “initial contributions towards [ontology], [he argues that] a dogma has developed which not only declares the meaning of Being to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect” (Heidegger, 1927, p.21). Consequently, he decides to return to the original Greek words themselves in order to determine meaning in relation to the question of Being without relying on prior ontologies or metaphysics. Therefore, Heidegger’s hermeneutics do not contradict my assessment of Heidegger in regards to his claim to separate his ontology from prior ontologies and metaphysics.

## 5.2 Potential Objection to my Analysis of the “They” in Regards to The Political Animal

Another potential objection that could be raised is that when I argue how Aristotle’s Political Animal resembles Heidegger’s the “They,” I ignore an important characteristic of the “They,” namely how the “They” is indeterminate, and does not refer to a particular individual or group. The indeterminacy of the “They” is different from the Political Animal because the Political Animal is allied to a particular city-state. Thus, an objector may disagree with my claim that the Political Animal sufficiently resembles the “They”.

In response to this objection, I admit that the indeterminacy of the “They” is indeed not present in Aristotle’s Political Animal. However, I argue that such an omission on my part does not undermine my point when I argued about the similarities between the “They” and the Political Animal. Of the three characteristics of the “They” that I note in my exegesis of Heidegger, two of them appear within Aristotle’s Political Animal. I am content to ignore the indeterminacy of the “They” because its indeterminacy is the least impactful of its three central characteristics in terms of how Dasein relates to the “They.” Although such an objection correctly observes that I cannot truthfully say that the “They” and the Political Animal are identical, I say that the two concepts are sufficiently similar to say that Heidegger is (at least in this instance) borrowing from Aristotle, despite aiming to do otherwise.



### 5.3 Potential Objection to my Conception of Inquiry

A third potential objection that one could raise against my argument is that my conception of inquiry does not, in fact, require rational thought. One could cite examples of animals—specifically, animals who are not capable of rational thought in the same sense as humans—as counterexamples that demonstrate inquiry without rational thought. For example, a robin searches for worms to eat. Another example would be a search and rescue dog that is used by police or rescue forces to find people. In both of these examples, one could say that since these animals are able to search and find what they are looking for, then they are therefore inquiring without the use of reason. As a result, if this objection holds, then it is not the case that Heidegger's *Dasein* presupposes within itself Aristotle's Rational Animal.

In response, I argue that the above counterexamples do not demonstrate inquiry, but merely the ability to search. In regards to the distinction between searching and inquiry, I understand searching to be the genus, and inquiry to be a species therein. While both the robin and the dog search (and often find what they search for), it does not follow that they inquire. Returning to my example from 3.b, the robin and the dog cannot inquire who ate the bag full of chips from the top shelf as I can. Recall that I posited 3.b that for one to inquire, one must be able to discern between a sufficient and an insufficient answer to one's inquiry—the key word here is *discern*, which I take to be an rational process, hence my example of discerning who ate the chips based not on sensory or instinctual clues, but through a rational determination of who fit the sufficient criteria. Accordingly, I understand inquiry to be searching according to a rational discernment. The robin and the dog (as far as I know) do not search via rational discernment, but rather through instinct or senses. Therefore, my conception of inquiry does, in fact, require the capacity for rational thought.

### 5.4 Potential Objection to my Interpretation of the Connection Between Heidegger and Aristotle

A fourth potential objection to my argument is that I am incorrectly interpreting the connection that I have above demonstrated between Aristotle and Heidegger. Perhaps Heidegger does not actually presuppose Aristotle's conception implicitly, but coincidentally arrived at similar conclusions to Aristotle. Heidegger does not assert that he will necessarily reach different conclusions than Aristotle, but merely that he will not rely on previous ontologies (such as Aristotle's). That Heidegger develops conceptions similar to Aristotle does not necessarily mean that he implicitly relies on them, but could suggest that the already mentioned similarities between the two demonstrate that such conceptions are fundamental within ontology. Using an analogy, if both Bob and Kevin look at strawberries through a microscope and they report similar findings, it does not follow that Bob copied Kevin's conclusions; rather, it could



suggest that Bob's conclusions confirm that Kevin's conclusions are accurate. Thus, as this objector may conclude, it is possible that Heidegger's ontology cannot help but reach similar conceptions as Aristotle if both are observing ontological truths.

In response, I argue that Heidegger's implicit presumption of Aristotelian concepts cannot be due to finding similar conclusions as Aristotle because Heidegger's Dasein—which presumes Aristotle's Rational Animal—is not a conclusion of Heidegger, but is his means of arriving at conclusions. In his introduction to *Being and Time*, Heidegger asserts that “to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being” (Heidegger, 1927, p.27) i.e. Dasein. Accordingly, Dasein is not one of Heidegger's conclusions per se, but is the entity that he claims is able to arrive at conclusions. By presuming Aristotelian concepts early in his work, Heidegger cannot avoid Aristotelian conclusions, meaning that he cannot create an ontology separate from prior ontologies.

## 6 CONCLUSION

I have shown that, contrary to Martin Heidegger's assertions in *Being and Time*, he is reliant on Aristotelian conceptions of the human being. I have done this by demonstrating how Heidegger's concept of Dasein presupposes Aristotle's concept of Rational Animal, and how this initial presupposition leads Heidegger's concept of the “They” to resemble Aristotle's concept of the Political Animal. This leads to the conclusion that Heidegger may be saying one thing, but actually doing another. Moreover, I have defended my arguments against objections that one could use to disagree with my assessment of Heidegger's *Fundamental Ontology* and its connection to Aristotle's *Politics*.

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## NOĒSIS XIX

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# COOPER VS HADOT: ON THE NATURE OF HELLENISTIC THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

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TRUNG NGO

Even though it is widely accepted that ancient philosophy is practiced as a way of life with the aim of achieving human flourishing, there is controversy about the nature of its practice. This paper pits two opposing views about the conduct of ancient philosophy. Siding with Hadot and against Cooper, I will argue in this essay that there is insufficient ground to constrain ancient philosophy to philosophical discourse.

**Key Words:** Stoicism, Therapeutic Philosophy, Philosophy as a Way of Life

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Pierre Hadot argues that there is a profound misunderstanding about the essence of ancient Greek philosophy with its representation as dedicated to theoretical and philosophical discourse since the Greeks' quest for wisdom involves a process of transformation of one's way of being and living (Hadot, 1995, 2002). Based on his review of ancient texts, he offers his thesis about the distinctiveness in the life of Hellenistic philosophers and their practices of philosophy which cannot be conducted outside of schools organized to educate those who have chosen a way of life unique to the doctrines being taught by the masters (Hadot, 2002, p.4,99). According to Hadot, these teachings demand the students to adopt a different life style geared toward a transformation of their worldview, the acquisition of new knowledge and the elimination of false beliefs. To that extent, the Epicurean, Stoic and Sceptic's philosophical schools all have the aim of achieving a good life for their followers through specific *therapeutic spiritual exercises* which are characterized by practices in discursive dialogue, meditation, contemplation as well as physical and dietary regimes (Hadot, 2002, p.6). If ancient philosophy is the search for wisdom and since for Hadot wisdom is a certain way of life, then to be a philosopher is to choose a school with a certain type of wisdom or way of life (Hadot, 2002, p.102). Hadot wants to draw the distinction between ancient



philosophy which he associates with self-training for a certain way of life and philosophical discourse which is used to discuss and train others (Hadot, 2002, p.138-9).

This view is challenged by John Cooper in his book *Pursuits of Wisdom*. Cooper objects to Hadot's claim that choice of life and mental exercises beyond dialectic discourses are necessary in the conduct of ancient philosophy (Cooper, 2012, p.13-23). He rejects Hadot's claim of the need for *existential option* in ancient philosophy since "*the only existential option involved in the basic commitment to being a philosopher, to living on the basis of philosophical reason*" (Cooper, 2012, p.18-19). In other words, he claims that Hadot's distinction between philosophy and philosophical discourse is unwarranted. This controversy has ramification in so far as we wish to understand the aim and approach in Hellenistic philosophy and secondarily to determine those elements which are common and different to the conduct of modern philosophy. Although Hadot's argument for the need of existential choice for ancient philosophers to complement philosophical discourse could not be entirely supported from evidence of Hellenistic extant texts, I will attempt to show in this paper that Cooper's criticism of Hadot has a number of weaknesses which can be challenged.

My thesis is that although knowledge acquired through philosophical discourse is *necessary* in ancient philosophy, it is not *sufficient* for the individual transformation which accompanies the choice of a way of life as required by the Hellenistic philosophical schools. This essay will have three parts. In the first part, I will reconstruct Cooper's argument which stipulates, in contrast with Hadot's thesis, that the essence of Hellenistic philosophy is simply the complete devotion to the practice of philosophical discourse in the form of study and discussion. Then, in the second part, I will show that Cooper's thesis does not have enough testimonial support and may also fail the sufficiency criteria. In their respective books, Hadot and Cooper include Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics and Epicurean schools, however in this essay I will limit my remarks to Stoicism as being representative for the review of the controversy with limited reference to Epicureanism. I will also offer a possible objection from Cooper to my argument before concluding.

## 2 THE HELLENISTIC THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

Hellenistic philosophy aims at acquiring wisdom through change in value judgments. In that sense is therapeutic (Hadot, 2002, p.102). It is widely accepted that both Epicureanism and Stoicism target human cognition as the base for the acquisition of knowledge, the elimination of false beliefs and the acquisition human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Human cognition is also seen as the pathway to attaining a perfect peace of mind. Nussbaum states that the Hellenistic philosophical schools all "conceived philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life, and the practice of philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique but an art of dealing with human

misery” (Nussbaum, 1994, p.3-4). In treating philosophy as means to heal the mind from reasoning errors, similar to medicine as means to cure the body, she also asserts that these schools have adopted a therapeutic approach to philosophy (Nussbaum, 1994, p.13-16). This analogy finds support in the fact that both therapeutic philosophy and medicine consider diagnostic and treatment as essential steps in their process for cure of human suffering and bodily sickness respectively. For the Stoics, philosophy is the practice of acquiring virtues which enable us to understand the world and guide human conduct (Aetius I, Preface 2 [26A], in Long and Sedley, 1987). One of the core virtue in stoicism is moderation or temperance, which involves the control of passions working against reason: “The Stoics say that passion is impulse which is excessive and disobedient to the dictates of reason” (Stobaeus 2.88 *SVF*3.378 [65A] in Long and Sedley, 1987). Here I follow with Long who argues that although control of the passion is a basic principle in Greek ethics, the stoics took particular care in identifying passion as weak opinion and the source of unhappiness (Long and Sedley, 1987, p.419-420). To that extent, fundamental to stoicism is the emphasis on the strength of will and character resulting from rigorous rhetorical and psychological training.

However, philosophers offer different views on the nature or more specifically the features of the Hellenistic therapeutic philosophy. On the one hand, Hadot argues that in order to be an Epicurean or Stoic philosopher in ancient Greece or Rome, one has to choose a way of life proposed by the respective schools and practice under the guidance of teachers a number of spiritual exercises, which include physical, dietary, discursive and meditative elements aimed at modifying our intellectual and spiritual outlook. On the other hand, Cooper dismisses any activities which are not part of the dialectic and philosophical discourse and considers them to be either secondary in nature or more likely influenced by religious impetus which are entirely non-philosophical (Cooper, 2012, p.22). What is at stake in this debate is to settle on the likely conduct of Hellenistic philosophy and its distinctiveness from today’s philosophical practice.

### 3 COOPER’S THESIS

Cooper argues that ancient philosophy from Socrates to the Hellenistic period is built from the combination of three fundamental assumptions which yield the ultimate power of reasoning and move us into action (Cooper, 2012, p.12):

- (P1) Human reason and its power of inquiry can motivate action (Cooper, 2012, p.1).
- (P2) Knowledge of truth is possible through reason (Cooper, 2012, p.12).
- (P3) Power of knowledge and truth is capable of ruling a person (Cooper, 2012, p.13-14).



- (C1) Therefore, knowledge through reason is *necessary* and *sufficient* for human actions and choice of life.
- (P4) Unlike today's practice, ancient philosophy contains a comprehensive and integrated system of thought including physics, logic and ethics (Cooper, 2012, p.15).
- (C2) Therefore, the *psychological gap* which exists today in moral philosophy as guidance to a good life is due to the lack of a *unified philosophical discourse*, and not because of missing spiritual exercises (Cooper, 2012, p.15).

Cooper rejects Hadot's view that a choice of a way of life, which encompasses a diverse set of mental exercises, precedes philosophical discourse. He argues that for the Greek Stoics, the clear understanding of the Stoic's principles through philosophical argumentation and discourse would determine their way of life. To that extent, he reckons that the later Roman Stoic texts, with their emphasis on exhortation and appeal to imagination rather than reasoning, cannot be admitted as true representation of ancient Hellenistic philosophy (Cooper, 2012, p.214-225). In the next section, I will lay out my arguments against Cooper's thesis based on two objections related to *testimonial support* and *sufficiency test*.

## 4 THE TESTIMONIAL OBJECTION

From a Stoic's perspective, premises (P1) and (P2) of Cooper's argument are relatively uncontroversial. According to the Stoics, human's soul is distinctive from other living species due to reason, which gives us the ability to judge impressions derived from the senses and enables us to develop cognitive distance and withhold assent to false beliefs (Aetius 4.21.I-4 [53H1] in Long and Sedley, 1987). However, I believe that (P3) could be challenged. Cooper based this premise on Plato's *Protagoras* in which Socrates posits that knowledge of the good and bad commands power on humans and can force us to act accordingly. But Socrates also cautions that this view may not hold for the majority who are unwilling to follow reason as guidance for their moral actions (Plato, *Protagoras* 352c-d). So what works for the Stoic sage, defined as a person who had attained moral and intellectual perfection (Baltzly, 2018), may not apply to all. My aim is to show that Cooper's (C1) conclusion is overextended, which could undermine his (C2) conclusion.

I am basing my first objection on the interpretation of Stoic's text fragments in Long and Sedley. Contrary to Cooper's view, I believe that the Stoics do not rely entirely on philosophical discourse for the determination of a way of life. By "comparing philosophy to a living being, likening logic, ethics and physics to the bones, flesh and soul respectively", they gave equal weighting to the practice of the three fields (Diogenes Laertius 7.39-41 [26B] in Long and Sedley, 1987). This view is supported by Sharpe who interpreted Hadot's thesis as implying that the practice of physics equates to the understanding



about the world and our relation within it, the practice of ethics to the use of reason to guide our actions with others, and the practice of logic to train our judgments and assents (Sharpe, 2014, p.381). So no priority could be assigned to dialectic discourse to the exclusion of other activities which are part of a way of life for ancient philosophers in their quest for wisdom: “The Stoics said that wisdom is scientific knowledge of the divine and the human, and that philosophy is the practice of expertise in utility with virtue being the highest utility. For that reason philosophy has three parts: physics is practiced to investigate the world, ethics is our engagement with human life and logic our engagement with discourse” (Aetius I, Preface 2 *SVF* 2.35 [26A] Long and Sedley, 1987).

By referring to Plato writings, we can also find evidence for the practice of philosophy which he characterized as the daily discipline of study, memorization and reasoning not necessarily only by oneself but also as part of the extended discourse between teacher and student (Plato, *Letter 7*, 340d-341d). In other words, the choice of a philosophical school and all related activities would likely be required. Support to the view about the limitations of dialectic discourse and arguments is also mentioned by Aristotle as he insisted on the need for building habits and proper upbringings (Aristotle, E.N. X9.1179b5-35). So in order for the power of knowledge and truth to rule a person, a significant amount of training under the guidance of a master is required.

In addition, Cooper’s rejection of Roman Stoic texts as evidential support to ancient way of life is not widely accepted. Some philosophers argue for their inclusion in order to bridge the gap between the craft (*technē*) and science (*epistēmē*) in philosophy (Braicovich, 2015, p.55). Others argue that to overlook Epictetus and Seneca as part of our investigation into Stoicism would be detrimental to our understanding of their therapeutic practice (Nussbaum, 1994, p.337). Sharpe also argues that Epictetus’s *Encheiridion*, which precedes Seneca, contains ample reference to spiritual exercises as guidance to his students to supplement the study of Chrisippus texts (Sharpe, 2014, p.378-384). The moral part of Stoicism contains heavy emphasis on mental training and exercises to control desires and mental anguish: “There are three topics in which the would-be honorable and good man needs to have been trained: that of desires and aversions, that of impulsions and repulsions and that of infallibility and uncarelessness” (Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.2.I-5 [56 C] Long and Sedley, 1987).

In summary, I believe that Cooper provided insufficient evidence to support his exclusion of Roman Stoic texts from our consideration for Stoicism’s way of life against the opinions of other contemporary philosophers. Moreover, the Socratic and Aristotelian’s traditions do not reject activities outside of philosophical discourse as part of their education either.

## 5 THE SUFFICIENCY OBJECTION

Cooper's thesis is based on the assumption that knowledge of the truth through reasoning is sufficiently powerful to move us into action (P3). Whereas it is not uncontroversial that reasoning is the necessary step for the motivation to act, I would argue that reason alone is insufficient to lead to action. I also submit that the authority of reason over passions is limited, and that reasoning also depends on the force of habit and experience, which are derived from activities that have been chosen in advance. I follow Sellars who argues that Socrates and the early Stoics, employing the medical analogy, consider "philosophy as a cure for the mind which requires a grasp of complex philosophical doctrine and a period of training designed to digest that doctrine", which implies the practice of psychological exercises aimed at eradicating false beliefs (Sellars, 2003, 2014). So the admission of some of Hadot's spiritual exercises does not undermine the importance of dialectic in the early Stoics' practice. It could also be argued that the Roman Stoics have effectively articulated the solutions to the cognitive and psychological gap identified by Cooper in our interpretation of the early Stoic fragments (Braicovich, 2015, p.54-55).

Support to the view that Hellenistic philosophy extends beyond dialectic discourse is also found in the argument that the ancient philosophical education includes biographical study of the sayings or writings of the masters (Sellars, 2003, p.15-32). The confluence of the philosopher's *bios* with his writings exemplifies the goal of ancient philosophy as transformation of character rather than a purely intellectual undertaking (Sellars, 2003, p.23). And if we agree with this assessment, then it would be difficult to limit a philosopher's way of life to philosophical discourse on the doctrines under study.

Finally, if we accept that Hellenistic philosophy is principally therapeutic in nature, then its method of treatment for the ills of the mind and human sufferings needs to be investigated. Can this therapy be restricted to philosophical discourse? Or does it require additional mental and physical activities which cut deeper into our psychology? Hadot argues that philosophical discourse and philosophical life are inseparable, and this fact provides the key distinction between ancient philosophers and the sophists who teach rhetoric without necessarily submitting their life to the rigors of the moral principles (Hadot, 2002, p.174).

To conduct therapeutic philosophy is to uncover the unconscious human motivations and beliefs. And while philosophical arguments could be used as the key for the treatment of false beliefs, it may be insufficient to address the complexity of human psychology (Nussbaum, 1994, p.490). The Hellenistic techniques such as memorization, visualization and daily introspection tackle the cognitive complexity in the context of the environment in which the person lives. The distinction between philosophical discourse and mental introspection may not be straightforward but are both required in the search for wisdom.



## 6 THE CONFUSION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHICAL WAY OF LIFE AND RELIGIOUS WAY OF LIFE

Cooper's counter-argument to the above objections is that he is not entirely against the inclusion of Hadot's spiritual exercises in the context of the daily activities of ancient philosophers which comprise of the study of logic, physics and ethics (Cooper, 2012, p.402-403). What Cooper insists is that we clearly distinguish the philosophical activities from those that have religious content. Cooper argues that meditation, memorization, confession and ascetic practices constitute religious way of life, and should not be confused them with philosophical way of life. He maintains that religious way of life has to be anchored on philosophical discourse and arguments.

I do not disagree with Cooper's objection. The distinctiveness of the philosophical discourse, along with its agreed rules and methods, is well entrenched in all the philosophical schools from ancient time to today. The fact that theology also embraces the same techniques in its teachings has led to some confusion between the fields of philosophical and religious studies. However, the recognition of this possible overlap should not prevent us from accepting that human psychology is a complex endeavor. In fact, it should also be recognized that Stoicism is partly anchored on theogony as expressed by their view of reason as derived from the mind of a pervasive and commanding nature (Cicero, *On the nature of the gods* [54B], in Long and Sedley, 1987). So the distinction between ancient philosophy and theology has never been so clear cut as Cooper has argued. Moreover, as long as ethics is considered a key field of study in philosophy, which is certainly the case in ancient Greek, then the possibility for overlap between theological and philosophical moral teachings is bound to occur.

I follow Sellars who argues that ancient philosophy cannot be limited to spiritual exercises, but this should not prevent the inclusion of mental exercises in their practice (Sellars, 2014, p.1180). I believe that the controversy can be overcome by substituting the religiously laden word *spiritual* with the more scientific terminology of *psychological* to reflect the mental exercises in the philosophical practice. Modern philosophy is often segregated from religious studies to highlight the importance of the analytical approach to philosophical discourse. This has not prevented the ongoing debate within philosophical circles on the merits of the continental approach with its emphasis on existential and phenomenological impetus versus the logical and scientific orientation of the analytical schools. It is not obvious to me that either approach is better and I would argue that both are needed to address the complexity of the problems in human psychology.

## 7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have examined Cooper's objection to Hadot's interpretation of Hellenistic way of life. I have argued that his thesis lacks philological evi-



dence, and that his interpretation of Stoic practice is too restrictive. My argument is that if we view Hellenistic philosophy as therapeutic in nature, then knowledge acquired through philosophical discourse, although necessary, is not sufficient for the individual transformation that accompanies the choice of a way of life. Complementary mental activities such as meditation, memorization and visualization are required to facilitate the cognitive and psychological conversion needed to correct false beliefs. The essence of philosophical discourse and arguments in ancient philosophy should be recognized, but not to the exclusion of other spiritual exercises that have been proven effective by later Roman Stoics. This conclusion leaves an open question for modern practice, namely, how should we view the psychological gap between dialectic and way of life for today's philosophers? Is the choice of a way of life for modern philosophers determined by their holistic worldview guided by intellectual exercises, or by mental exhortation following certain dogmas?

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## NOĒSIS XIX

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# PETER KLEIN'S INFINITISM PRECLUDES JUSTIFICATION

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TUNÇ DOĞAN

Can we adduce reasons for propositions forever? Peter Klein thinks we can. In this paper, I set out to show that his view precludes justification simpliciter. In **section I**, I introduce his position. In **section II**, I introduce what Klein calls the regress problem. In **section III**, I show Klein's reason for thinking that only his view solves the regress problem. In **section IV**, I argue that his view precludes justification simpliciter. In **section V**, I deliver an objection to my view. I then argue that granting the objection would require Klein to deny a premise integral to his argument that other views of the structure of justification do not succeed in solving the regress problem. I finish by concluding that Klein must either deny or substantially revise his view.

**Key Words:** epistemology, infinitism, justification, regress problem, foundationalism, coherentism

## 1 INTRODUCING INFINITISM

Infinitism is the view that a belief is justified if and only if, for a subject *S*, there is an endless chain of non-circular propositions available such that each succeeding proposition in the chain is a reason for the immediately preceding one (Klein, 2007, p.11). The chain of propositions may branch out to other infinitely long and non-repeating chains. 'Availability' of a proposition can also be construed as the subject's having the 'capacity' to believe in a proposition or as the subject's being 'disposed' to believe a proposition (Klein, 1999, p.308). Dispositions include second-degree dispositions to have first-degree dispositions to believe a proposition (Klein, 1999, p.308) I will use 'capacity', 'availability', and 'disposed to be' interchangeably. Infinitism depicts justification of a proposition as emerging. The more reasons are adduced to a proposition and the longer the chain of non-repeating reasons gets, the more justified a proposition gets (Klein, 2013b, p.294). The reasons that feature in



a chain of justification are exhaustive such that the antecedent(s) in the chain are the only justifications for the consequent(s) (Klein, 1999, p.324). The only way the external information relates to the chain is that it *makes* a belief a reason in the chain, but is not itself a part of the chain of the reasoning (Klein, 1999, p.324).

## 2 THE REGRESS PROBLEM

I will describe what the regress problem is to make Klein's argument, and in turn my argument, intelligible. As Klein puts it, the regress problem is the problem of determining the correct structure of justification that provides a good model for "locating propositions that are worthy of belief" (Klein, 2007, p.6) or for "increasing the credibility of a non-evident proposition" (Klein, 2013a, p.275). The criterion for a good structure of justification is thus that, following the structure, a proposition should not arbitrarily be believed. In other words, following the structure, a non-evident proposition's truth-value should be determinable. Klein argues that only infinitism can satisfy this criterion.

For instance, take the proposition expressed by my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening. The truth of this proposition might not be evident to someone skeptical of my belief- reports. In any case, let us suppose for the ease of example that the proposition's truth is not evident. Another way of putting this is to say that it is not clear that my belief is justified. If Klein is right, the proposition is justified just in case there is available to me an endless chain of reasons, where each one of which I am disposed to adduce as a reason for the immediately preceding one, and none is a duplicate of any other in the chain. I might start to traverse this chain of reasons by thinking that I'm justified in my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening because I remember going to the gym. That, in turn, is because my memory functions properly. I have reason to believe that, in turn, because my memory rarely leads me astray on such everyday matters; and so on, *ad infinitum*. Klein thinks that the proposition that I set out to justify is more justified the more reasons I (correctly) adduce. Whether it can be completely justified depends on whether there is an endless chain of such reasons available to me, which I'm disposed to traverse. That is the picture.

## 3 KLEIN'S REJECTION OF FOUNDATIONALISM AND COHERENTISM

To get my argument off the ground, I need to give an account of Klein's rejection of foundationalism and coherentism. For our purposes, foundationalism is the view that all justified belief rests on a foundation of non-inferential knowledge or belief. These beliefs are basic, in the sense that one is justified in believing them without justifying them. Coherentism is the view that all

justified belief is justified in virtue of the strength of their relation to beliefs ‘surrounding’ them. Whereas foundationalism posits that knowledge is structured like a building, with a foundation ‘at the bottom’ justifying everything above; coherentism posits that knowledge is structured like a web, where the density and the strength of the connections in the web justify the nodes of the web.

Klein argues that foundationalism and coherentism do not solve the regress problem, and that only infinitism does. The argument against foundationalism is as follows. Suppose that there is a foundational proposition *b* such that *b* is autonomously justified. The nature of this autonomous justification is irrelevant. Further suppose that *b* is autonomously justified because of some foundational property *F* such that all and only those propositions having *F* are autonomously justified, that *F* is the only property that confers autonomous justification, and that if *b* did not have *F*, all beliefs grounded by *b* are not justified. If we ask of this *F* whether it is truth-conducive, we face three options:

1. *F* is truth-conducive, such that autonomously justified propositions are likely to be true (greater than 50% chance of being true).
2. *F* is not truth-conducive, such that autonomously justified propositions are not likely to be true (less than 50% chance of being true).
3. *F* is neither truth-conducive or not truth-conducive, such that a proposition’s having *F* does not have any bearing on the truth value of autonomously justified propositions (50% percent chance of being true).

If (2) is the case, it does not make sense to believe *b* because this would render all the beliefs one has which are only based on *b* likely to be false. Likewise, if (3) is the case, it does not make sense to believe *b* because all the beliefs one has which are only based on *b* are neither likely to be true nor false, and we want our beliefs to at least likely to be true.

The only remaining option is (1). But if (1) is the case, then *b* is not a foundational proposition because the chain of reasons can be continued to the reason for *b*’s being foundational. This reason is that *b* has *F* and that the propositions which have *F* are likely to be true. In virtue of the second clause of this conjunction, the regress of reasons continues. Thus, foundationalism does not solve the regress problem (Klein, 2013a, p.276-277).

Following Klein, neither does coherentism solve the regress problem. The line of reasoning is like that above. The only difference is that having *F* does not render a proposition foundational but instead makes it a member of a set of propositions coherent in a way the coherentist asks. In this case, if *F* is not truth-conducive or is neither truth-conducive nor not truth-conducive, then belief in that set of coherent propositions is arbitrary. If *F* is truth-conducive, then the proposition that “coherent sets are likely to contain propositions that



are true” must either be in the set or not. If the proposition is not in the set, then the coherentist has a circular view of justification. If the proposition is in the set, the regress of reasons has continued (Klein, 2013a, p.278).

#### 4 INFINITISM PRECLUDES JUSTIFICATION

I am now in a position to introduce my argument. Grant Klein’s infinitism. Suppose that I have a belief *P* and that there is a set of reason-making facts *A*. The relation *R* between *P* and *A* is such that if the relation between a belief and a set of external facts is *R*, then the set of reason-making facts makes the belief into a reason that features in a chain of justifications. *Ex hypothesi*, *A* makes *P* into a reason that features in a chain of justifications.

In more concrete terms, suppose *P* is the first proposition that justifies my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening. Remember that this proposition was that *I remember going to the gym*. What makes *P* a reason for the belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening? The answer lies in the set of reason-making facts *A*. One of the facts in this set might be that *P* is about me, as opposed to someone else. For how could a reason justify a belief about me if the reason adduced is about someone else? It could not in the absence of some other reason. (Think about the reason you would be puzzled if I told you that the reason I believe that I went to the gym yesterday evening is because, and only because, *you* went to the gym yesterday evening.) Other candidate reason-making facts that might be included in *A* are: that *P* is intended to be a reason for some belief; that *P* features some action that is identical to the action that features in the belief for which it is adduced, and so on. I postulated above that the relation between these set of reason-making facts, *A*, and *P*, is the relation *text*. It is in virtue of *A*’s bearing the relation *R* to *P* that *P* is a reason for my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening. Pictorially, where the dots represent the chain of reasons that come after and justify *P* and each other, and where *B* represents the belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening, and where the arrows represent the direction of justification:

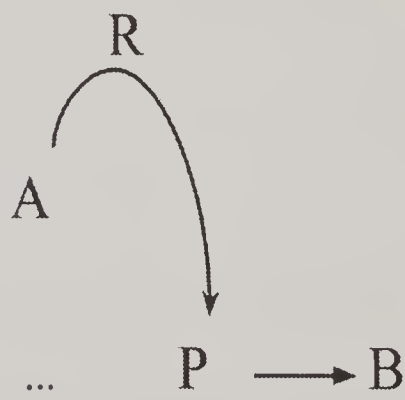


Figure 1

But if this is so, *P* has the property of bearing the relation *R*, *F*.<sup>1</sup> If we ask of *P* what it is that makes it into a reason, the answer is that *P* has *F*.

<sup>1</sup>More explicitly: “*P* has the property of having been made into a reason by a set of external



In asking so, we provided a justification for  $P$ 's being a reason, so invoked another chain of justifications. Notice that we did not justify  $P$  but justified its being a reason for another proposition. But what justifies that having  $F$  makes  $P$  into a reason? It cannot be that merely having  $F$  somehow justifies  $P$ 's being a reason, as if having  $F$  was a foundational property. Put another way, it cannot be that the chain of justifications for  $P$ 's being a reason terminates at  $F$ . That would run counter to what Klein holds. The chain of justifications must continue. Pictorially, where  $F$  can be parsed as a shorthand for  $P$ 's bearing  $R$  to  $A$ , or  $P$ 's being a reason for  $B$ :

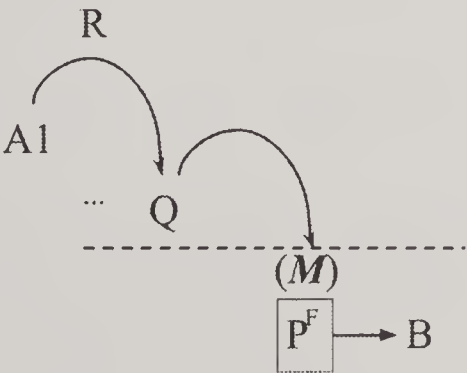
$$P^F \longrightarrow B$$

Figure 2

To return to the concrete example above, the question of what justifies  $P^F$  translates to the question of what makes that I remember going to the gym a reason for my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening in virtue of its being about me, that it is intended to be a reason for  $B$ , that it features some action that is identical to the action featuring in the belief for which it was adduced, and other facts about the reason adduced that make up the reason-making fact set  $A$ ?

In what follows,  $M$  denotes  $P$ 's having  $F$  making  $P$  into a reason, for otherwise everything gets a bit mouthful. Following Klein, mere belief cannot fully justify  $M$  (Klein, 2013b, p.292).  $M$  must be justified in virtue of a reason,  $Q$ . Note that  $Q$  does not lie in the same chain of justifications as  $P$  but justifies  $P$ 's being in the chain of justifications in which it features.  $Q$  is at a 'meta' or 'upper' level, so to speak. It is salient to ask at this point: what justifies  $Q$ 's being a reason for  $M$ ? It must be a set of reason-making facts,  $A1$ . Per definitions above, the relation between  $Q$  and  $A1$  must be  $R$ , and thus  $Q$  must have  $F1$ . At this juncture, one might ask what justifies that having  $F1$  makes  $Q$  into a reason. Here, the reasoning in this paragraph will repeat for  $Q$ . This line of reasoning can go on *ad infinitum*.

Pictorially (the dots symbolise the chain of reasons that justify  $Q$  and each other):



facts via the appropriate sort of relation to those facts". Here I make the substantial assumption that bearing a relation can be a property of a reason.

### Figure 3

Part of *Q* might be that a reason for why a proposition adduced as a reason for some belief is a reason for that proposition is its being about the thing that the proposition for which it is adduced as a belief is about. Part of *AI* might consequently include facts about justifying justification, such as the fact, if it is a fact, that numerical identity of subjects is necessary for sufficiency of relevancy of one proposition to another *qua* a reason. (Exact contents of *Q* and *AI* is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is that if Klein's view is right, there must be some such *Q* and some such *AI*.)

Going back to our starting point, the problem that arises from this picture is that one never gets from *P* (the initial proposition in the above line of reasoning) to the proposition *P* justifies, *B*. One only goes 'up' or 'meta' in justifying *P*'s being a reason (namely, that it has *F*), and then justifying *P*'s being a reason's being a reason (namely, that it has *FI*), *ad infinitum*. This is a problem because Klein holds that a belief is justified if and only if for a subject *S* there is an endless chain of non-circular propositions available (i.e., if and only if *S* is disposed to believe such propositions, or if and only if *S* has the capacity to believe such propositions). According to this picture, before *S* could even undertake justifying *P*, she should be disposed to justifying *P*'s being a reason (that is, adduce *F*), and be disposed to that's being a reason (that is, adduce *FI*), and so on. The problem with this is that the justification of *P* simply never comes. What I mean by this is that *S* can never be disposed to believe *P* to start with, for *S* would never be able to get to the reason for *P*, for *S* would be stuck in the infinitely long chain of non-recurring reasons that make each other a reason but are not a reason for each other. By adducing more reasons, *S* would only be making *P*'s being a reason stronger, not making *P* stronger. Thus, granting infinitism, one can never justify a proposition. This is an unacceptable result.

## 5 AN OBJECTION

I will now consider an objection to my argument. One of the responses to this objection will motivate the implication of my argument that Klein must either grant the foundationalist and the coherentist their solution to the regress problem or deny his objection to them. The objection to my argument is that it needs only be the case that *S* be disposed to give reasons for *P* in the chain of justifications in which *P* features. (That is, that it needs only be the case that *S* be disposed to traverse the propositions that the dots in Figure 1 represent.) The 'meta' propositions considered here (i.e., a proposition about a proposition's being a reason) need not feature in *S*'s account for her belief. (That is, *S* need not go 'up' the ladder of arrows that would ensue.) In other words, the assumption that the reason-making facts must feature in the chain of infinitely long non-recurring propositions *S* must be disposed to traverse is not warranted.



This qualification to Klein's account of propositional justification is not justified because of two reasons. The first is that there is at least one 'meta' reason  $S$  must consider, namely that of the property of being related to a set of reason-making external information in the appropriate way. This must be a reason to consider for otherwise having this property would be a foundational reason for that proposition's being a reason. That would contradict Klein's position.

The second reason this qualification is not warranted is that the way Klein takes himself to show that foundationalism and coherentism do not solve the regress problem uses the same assumption. I consider his case against foundationalism below, but *mutatis mutandis* it is also applicable to his case against coherentism. Recall the argument against foundationalism: some foundational proposition  $b$  has  $F$  and it is in virtue of this  $F$  that  $b$  is a foundational property. Klein then goes on to show that  $F$  must be truth-conducive, and that this truth-conduciveness must be a further reason for  $b$ , and thus that  $b$  is not foundational. The property of truth-conduciveness is used to show that the regress continues. But truth-conduciveness of  $F$  is an external fact related  $F$  to in such a way that it makes  $F$  a reason for us to believe  $b$ . We might also say that it is  $R$ -related to  $F$ . In citing truth-conduciveness of  $F$ , Klein thus makes a reason-making fact feature in the chain of justifications that justify  $b$ . That reason-making facts cannot feature in a chain of justifications is just what the objection is problematising. Thus, the objection problematises an assumption Klein uses to dismiss contenders to solving the regress problem.

My argument uses possession of a reason-making property  $F$  in a similar way. The difference is that, in my argument, there must be a reason not for  $F$ 's truth-conduciveness, but for its reason-making-ness. Should Klein deny this usage, he should also deny his usage. *Ipsa facto*, Klein should either revise his infinitism or deny the assumption that reason-making facts cannot feature in chain of justifications. Denying the assumption enables my main argument, which, if true, renders infinitism unacceptable. Thus, Klein should either revise his infinitism or reject it.

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## NOËSIS XIX

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# ON DEGREE ACTUALISM

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ALEXANDRA LECLAIR

This paper addresses the conflicting views of Serious Actualism and Possibilism in the debate on whether merely possible individuals can have properties. Advocating a view I call Degree Actualism, I propose this debate to be addressed in terms of *degrees of Being* rather than existence. I show how Degree Actualism removes property possession from its thus instated binomial categorization and introduces a fine-grain evaluation system to more accurately classify individuals. Degree Actualism presents an opportunity for both Serious Actualism and Possibilism to be correct and not contend with one another.

**Key Words:** actualism, possibilism, being, modality, merely possible

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will explain and argue for a view I call Degree Actualism. Degree Actualism claims that all individuals who possess a degree of Being may associate with properties. In providing justification for this claim, I will first outline the basic arguments of Serious Actualism and Possibilism as defined by Alvin Plantinga and Nathan Salmon.

Serious Actualism and Possibilism are two conflicting views in modal metaphysics. Serious Actualism states that merely possible individuals cannot attain properties since they lack existence; whereas Possibilism states that merely possible individuals can attain properties, in spite of the fact that they lack existence. Upon further investigation of these claims, I will show how Degree Actualism allows for merely possible individuals to possess properties while maintaining a position consistent with a form of Serious Actualism. I will argue that Plantinga and Salmon wrongfully assume that property possession is to be defined in terms of an individual's existence. In Degree Actualism, I propose that property possession should rather be defined in *degrees of Being*. This revision removes property possession from its thus instated binomial categorization and introduces a fine-grain evaluation system to more

accurately classify individuals. Degree Actualism disambiguates the relationship between individuals and their properties and eliminates the contention between Serious Actualism and Possibilism.

## 2 THE SERIOUS ACTUALIST

Formally stated, Serious Actualism is the view that, necessarily, an individual has properties only if that individual exists. Plantinga condones this position and believes that properties cannot precede an individual's existence (Plantinga, 1982, p.3). This view largely appeals to common sense for it seems illogical to attempt to describe an individual who does not presently exist. In order for an individual to have a property relative to a specific time, place or world, it ought to follow that that individual necessarily exists in that specific time, place or world, as well. For instance, if one were to propose propositions attained by Jane Goodall, one may justly state Goodall has the property of "being the world's leading primatologist", and "being an animal-human conservationist". However, if Jane Goodall was never born, thereby neither existing at this particular time nor in this particular world, the previously suggested properties would hold no relevance to any individual (Plantinga, 1982, p.3,6).

Consequently, the Serious Actualist claims that merely possible individuals cannot attain properties. Since there is no instance where a merely possible individual is presently exemplified, it necessarily follows that their properties would precede their existence in every case (Plantinga, 1982, p.3). Maintaining the logic previously established, it is nonsensical to discuss merely possible individuals since their "attained" properties are not relevant to any particular individual.

At this point, I believe it would be helpful to establish a framework for what it means to exist and for an individual to attain a property. Suppose we have a space of possible worlds  $W$ . Within this space, there is possible world 1 ( $W_1$ ), possible world 2 ( $W_2$ ) and so on. Among these worlds, one has the distinction of being the actual world ( $W_@$ ). Let us associate with each world a domain of individuals ( $D_W$ ), where  $D$  represents all of the individuals present in  $W$ . Corresponding to any property  $P$  in any possible world  $W$ , we can introduce the extension of  $P$  at  $W$ . The extension of  $P$  at  $W$  will be a subset of  $D_W$ . For instance, the extension of *being a pencil* in  $W_@$  would reference all pencils included in  $D_@$  (Plantinga, 1976, p.141).

Plantinga's assessment of Serious Actualism, as defined in this framework, claims that merely possible individuals are not members of  $D_@$  and therefore cannot be an extension of any  $P$  with respect to  $W_@$ . The definition of Serious Actualism can be more formally stated as follows;

**SA:** Necessarily, for any individual  $X$  and any property  $P$ , if  $X$  is in the extension of  $P$ , then  $X$  exists.

Since merely possible individuals exist in merely possible worlds, it is important to understand how this framework applies to both  $W@$  and other possible worlds. For any object  $X$ , property  $P$  and world  $W$ , if  $X$  is the extension of  $P$  with respect to  $W$ , then  $X$  exists within  $W$ . A consequence of this claim is that individuals may only attain properties in worlds where they are members of the associated domain. Since Jane Goodall exists in  $W@$ , she is a member of  $D@$  thereby granting her the ability to attain properties in  $W@$ . In the case of merely possible individuals, where they are not members of  $D@$ , they cannot attain properties in  $W@$ .

### 3 THE POSSIBILIST

While Serious Actualism seems tenable, the innate tendency to consider which properties a merely possible individual could attain exposes a fundamental error in the view. Possibilism addresses this conflict and proposes that there are individuals that do not exist and attain properties. To support this claim, Salmon proposes the counterexample of his merely possible brother, Noman. Noman is the individual who would have existed had egg  $E$  of Salmon's mother been fertilized by sperm  $S$  of Salmon's father (Salmon, 1987, p.49-50). The fact that this event did not occur, indicates that Noman is not contained within  $D@$ . However, even though Noman is not a member of  $D@$ , one may still be enticed to ponder what he would have looked like had he existed. In addition to the possible properties pertaining to Noman's physical appearance, he also attains the properties of:

- (a) Not existing in  $W@$
- (b) Being the subject of this paper
- (c) Being named *Noman*
- (d) Being the subject of propositions such as "Noman is the possible brother of Salmon".

This is peculiar when addressed in terms of Serious Actualism because, even though Noman does not exist in  $D@$ , he is in the extension of (a)-(d) with respect to  $W@$ . Noman complies with the first condition of Serious Actualism, however contends with the second. Generalizing a view from these considerations, we may construct the following argument for the conclusion that Serious Actualism is false:

- (P1) If non-existent individuals have properties in the actual world, then Serious Actualism is false.
- (P2) Some non-existent individuals have properties in the actual world.
- (C1) Serious Actualism is false.



While Possibilism corrects Serious Actualism's claim that merely possible individuals cannot attain properties, its rationale still seems to present a contradiction. The Possibilist has failed to explain *why* it is that a non-existent individual can attain properties. The dilemma we face now is that neither Serious Actualism nor Possibilism present satisfying solutions to the merely possible individual's property possession debate. On one hand, Serious Actualism proposes a convincing argument yet undesirable conclusion; and on the other hand, Possibilism proposes an unconvincing argument yet desirable conclusion. I believe this incompatibility is the consequence of wrongly defining property possession in terms of existence. In my view Degree Actualism, I propose property possession to be defined in terms of Being.

## 4 THE DEGREE ACTUALIST

Noman is a great example of an instance where it is natural to ponder about an individual who does not exist. However, as mentioned before, it remains illogical to associate properties with non-existent individuals. It would seem as if merely possible individuals have created an instance that is simultaneously logical and illogical. I attribute this contradiction to the wrongful assumption that property association is dependent on existence. If we were to redefine property association in terms of *Being*, this contradiction would disappear. This is the view I call Degree Actualism. In the remainder of this paper, I will demonstrate how the substitution of *existence* for Being reveals why it is a merely possible individual can both not exist and attain properties at the same time.

Let us begin with a principle state of Being and call it *existence*. Rather than regarding Being as a binomial, I conceive it in a matter of degrees. In other words, there are *degrees of Being*. As an individual falls away from actuality, its degree of Being diminishes. This *falling away* is what differentiates present individuals from past and future individuals. While individuals in these circumstances still have Being, they possess less of it since they no longer reside in the state of existence. Past individuals have a lesser degree of Being than present individuals because they once did, but no longer exist. Future individuals have a lesser degree of Being than past individuals because they have not, but soon will exist.

Merely possible individuals can be defined in the same way. These individuals have a lesser degree of Being than future individuals because they merely possibly could exist. On Degree Actualism, past Being, future Being and merely possible Being are all ways of Being that are less fundamental than existence. Notice here how past, future and merely possible individuals each do not exist. What differentiates their non-existence from each other is that the first individual had once existed, the second individual will soon exist and the last individual will only ever merely possibly exist. This creates the following confidence hierarchy to the degrees of Being:

Present individuals → Past individuals → Future individuals → Merely  
possible individuals

An individual in the present state is *currently existing* thereby removing any ambiguity associated with its Being. Individuals of merely possible states, however, still possess multiple possibilities as to how exactly their properties may manifest. In other words, as an individual falls further away from existence, and further down the hierarchical chain, its propensity to exist lessens. This elucidates why properties of merely possible individuals are always stated as mere postulations, whereas properties of present individuals are stated with confidence. For example, all properties assigned to Noman are speculative—*perhaps* Noman has brown hair, *perhaps* Noman is taller than Salmon—whereas any properties assigned to Jane Goodall would be definitive—Jane Goodall *is* a primatologist, Jane Goodall *is* an animal-human conservationist.

I would also like to propose that a merely possible individual's Being is strengthened by its attained properties. While these properties are less definitive than those of past individuals, a merely possible individual depends on their properties to remain instantiated in  $W@$ . To better clarify this point, let's return to the example of Jane Goodall. Jane Goodall exists in  $W@$  regardless of whether or not others acknowledge her attained properties. Whereas a merely possible individual, such as Noman, only possess Being for as long as its properties are recognized. Recall Noman's proposed properties in Section II. Properties (b)-(d) could be revised so that Noman no longer exists in the bounds of this paper. If Noman were to be negated from this paper (and similarly negated from Salmon's paper, *Existence*) properties (b), (c), and (d) would cease to address a particular individual. Property (a) would remain, however, if the other properties of Noman are not acknowledged, (a) becomes insignificant. I highlight this particular attribute of merely possible individuals to show that not only can merely possible individual attain properties, but the integrity of their Being depends on them.

Let's take a moment and revisit the SA thesis proposed in Section I. Plantinga had originally defined Serious Actualism in terms of existence. As a Degree Actualist, we are now inclined to revise SA so that this established error is corrected. Therefore, I propose the following claim:

$SA_{Degree}$ : Necessarily, for all individuals  $X$  and all properties  $P$ , if individual  $X$  has property  $P$ , then  $X$  has Being.

Once again, since merely possible individuals exist in merely possible worlds, it is important to understand how  $SA_{Degree}$  applies to possible worlds. Necessarily, for all individuals  $X$ , all properties  $P$ , and all worlds  $W$ , if  $X$  has  $P$ , then  $X$  has Being in  $D_W$ . The neat thing about Degree Actualism is that the variable *Being* bifurcates into four possible paths—present Being, past Being, future Being and merely possible Being. This allows for a fine-grain sorting system of all individuals. Rather than being binomially sorted as existing or non-existing, Degree Actualism further classifies the individuals a Serious



Actualist would otherwise deem as non-existing. This facilitates the disentanglement of non-existing individuals and better illuminates their relationship to their properties. As we have already discussed, the relationship between an individual and its property becomes modified as it travels along the hierarchy of Being.

At this point, I believe we have developed a strong understanding of Degree Actualism and are now prepared to see how it abolishes the contention between Serious Actualism and Possibilism. To quickly review, Serious Actualism has two clauses; (1) merely possible individuals do not exist and (2) only existing individuals can attain properties. We have just revised these two clauses to (1\*) Merely possible individuals have a degree of Being and (2\*) all individuals with a degree of Being attain properties. Evidently, Noman is no longer in contention with either clause. Since he is a merely possible individual, he possesses a degree of Being, and since he possesses a degree of Being, he can attain properties. Possibilism also has two clauses; (1') merely possible individuals do not exist and (2') merely possible individuals attain properties. In Section II, we had already seen that Noman is consistent with both these clauses, however we had felt there to be a contradiction. If we were to translate Possibilism into the language of Degree Actualism, the previous clauses would be revised to (1'\*) merely possible individuals have a degree of Being less significant than existence and (2'\*) merely possible individuals attain properties. While the overall consistency of Noman with Possibilism has not changed, the rewording of these clauses allows for a more comfortable fit.

The revised clause (1\*) of Serious Actualism is quite similar to the revised clause (1'\*) of Possibilism. In fact, the only difference is that (1'\*) clarifies that the degree of Being possessed by merely possible individuals is less significant than that acquired by existence. Similarly, (2\*) and (2'\*) resemble one another as well. The disambiguation facilitated by Degree Actualism sorted the non-existent individuals. Plantinga and Salmon had failed to do this, and so their stances seemed to be in contention with one another. However, as demonstrated, the application of Degree Actualism to both their foundations exposed that they are, more or less, identical.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In summary, we have investigated the views of Serious Actualism and Possibilism as defined by Plantinga and Salmon. Upon discovering contention and discomfort in both views, I had proposed Degree Actualism as a possible alternative. Degree Actualism's ability to define property association in terms of degrees of Being was demonstrated to satisfyingly explain why it is a non-existent individual, namely Noman, is still able to attain properties. It was also understood that the bifurcating nature of Being allowed for a fine-grain sorting method of all the individuals loosely classified as non-existent by both Serious Actualism and Possibilism. By establishing a hierarchical chain to the degrees of Being, it was understood how present Being, past Being, future Being and



merely possible Being are all related to one another. Then, upon translating the views of Serious Actualism and Possibilism into the language of Degree Actualism, Plantinga's and Salmon's stances were shown to be quite similar to one another, hence nullifying the apparent contention. In conclusion, Degree Actualism proposes a strong alternative to Serious Actualism and Possibilism, and offers a solution to the merely possible individual's ability to attain properties debate that is both logically and fundamentally pleasing.

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## NOËSIS XIX

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# MORAL PHILOSOPHY, WRITING, AND HISTORY

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### IN CONVERSATION WITH THOMAS HURKA

15 March 2018

Dr. Thomas Hurka is a professor of moral philosophy, and the Chancellor Henry N.R. Jackman Distinguished Chair in Philosophical Studies. He began his career as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto before completing his BPhil and DPhil at Oxford University. He subsequently taught at the University of Calgary from 1978 to 2002 before returning to the University of Toronto as a professor. As an author, Hurka is famous for re-kindling philosophical interest in perfectionist accounts of ethics with his groundbreaking 1993 book, *Perfectionism*. His other publications include *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (2001), *The Best Things in Life: A Guide to What Really Matters* (2011), and *British Ethical Theorists from Sidgwick to Ewing* (2014). He has received several awards for his work, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2006 and, most recently, the 2017 Killam Prize in Humanities. Outside of academia, Hurka produced weekly ethical commentaries as a columnist with the *Globe and Mail* from 1989 to 1992, and for “The Monday Column” on CBC-TV from 1998-2000.

**Noēsis:** Thanks for doing this interview. As you’re talking to us you’re in Australia. Could you tell us a bit about what you’re doing there?

**Hurka:** The trip was an invitation to visit the Australian National University. I’m working on a paper that I have been working on for several years, about what makes one wrong act more seriously wrong than another. Lots of people talk about “this is right, and that’s wrong”; but we also think that some wrong acts are more seriously wrong than others. For instance, murder is more seriously wrong than breaking a promise. That’s easy to explain, but in more complicated cases it gets interesting. I’m also going to present a version of the talk I gave as a Killam lecture, so I’m revising that, and then I want to get to another paper. A lot of people in ethics write about a concept of wellbeing, meaning what’s good for people. It’s supposed to be importantly different

from what's simply good. I'm a skeptic about the idea that there's a distinct concept of wellbeing, and I've been working on a paper about that for a while. That's a mess, so I've got to re-do it quite radically.

**Noësis:** You were awarded the Killam Prize because of your contributions to moral philosophy, including your books *Perfectionism*, *Virtue, Vice and Value*, and *The Best Things in Life*. Would you say there's a key thesis or line of thought that you've developed through your work?

**Hurka:** I've written articles on lots of different topics, but my major focus of interest is writing about what's good and what's bad. When I was a graduate student, the only views that people considered were hedonism (that what's good is pleasure and what's bad is pain and that's all) and preference or desire theory (that what's good in somebody's life is whatever he wants). Historically, most of philosophy didn't take either of those two views. They thought that certain things, like knowledge and virtue, are good in themselves quite apart from whether people wanted or would get pleasure from them. My undergraduate education plus my personal background gave me an interest in those historical views. The term for those views given by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* was "perfectionism". My first book was about a more specific version of perfectionism that was very historically prominent. Simply put, perfectionism is the view that human goods are all based in some idea of human nature, and the good human life is the one that develops the properties that are fundamental to human nature. I defended that view, and then added a more detailed elaboration of it. So, the book was a defense of the idea that there are human goods that are not pleasure and that are not made good because we desire them.

In *Perfectionism* I argued that virtue, or being a morally good person, was not among the human goods. You ought to care about other people, but not because being virtuous makes your life better. I didn't see, contrary Aristotle and a long tradition, that our nature favors virtue over vice; that someone who uses rationality to hurt people is developing his fundamental human properties any less than someone who uses rationality to help them. So, I hadn't included virtue. By the time I wrote the second book, *Virtue, Vice, and Value*, I didn't believe in the part about human nature anymore. In it, I give an account of what virtue and vice are, independent of human nature. It has a very simple central idea, which was the most widely accepted account of vice and virtue around a hundred years ago. No one was paying any attention to it in the contemporary literature. It's a perfectionist account of the positive value of virtue, and the negative value of vice. For instance, being benevolent or being honest is a good thing and makes your life better, and being malicious or being selfish makes your life worse.

*The Best Things in Life* is a trade book that I was invited to write for a more popular audience. I wrote about what's good, including quite a bit on pleasure and pain, and went through objective perfectionist goods like knowledge, achievement, virtue, and personal relationships. Those three books—*Perfectionism*, *Virtue, Vice and Value*, and *The Best Things in Life*—have a



central theme, because they're about what's good and what makes your life better. What makes your life better isn't primarily happiness or satisfying your preferences but these more objective, or perfectionist, goods.

**Noësis:** Why is the view called perfectionism? Does it have any relationship to the colloquial sense of perfectionism?

**Hurka:** No, it does not. When I was first writing about the view that you ought to develop your nature, I referred to that as an ethics of self-realization. That is what it was called in the sixties if people talked about it, and that was a term that goes back to F.H. Bradley in the 19th century. Then Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, and he referred to those views as perfectionist. That became the terminology, and I just took it on. Rawls took it from other 19th century writers, like Henry Sidgwick and T.H. Green. It comes from the idea of developing human nature, because the thought was that you're perfecting your nature—hence the term perfectionism. In Rawls' view, you could use perfectionism to refer to that sort of view, or to refer to a view that is just a list of goods with no reference to human nature. Knowledge is good, virtue is good, achievement is good, aesthetic appreciation is good, and that's called a perfectionist view. That is the way I tend to think of it nowadays. 'Perfectionism' also doesn't have the pejorative connotations of the everyday word. As in, you care too much about fussy little details. So, there's a disconnect with the everyday use of the word perfectionist, but I blame Rawls.

**Noësis:** On the subject of terminology, you used to work for the *Globe and Mail*. How did that influence your writing? Do you find it easy to translate ideas from philosophy into the common vernacular?

**Hurka:** I don't write highly technical things. I don't use tons of symbols. I tend to write short sentences, rather than hugely long, complicated sentences. So, I think writing for a newspaper improved my writing because it made it simpler. When I wrote *The Best Things in Life*, I had to write it for non-philosophers. The trick there wasn't so much the writing sentence by sentence. It's that, when you write for philosophers, you can assume that they're interested. If they've got a copy of the journal, and they're reading the article, you don't have to hook them in. But trade writing and newspaper writing is all about hooking people in. The most important paragraph in a newspaper column is the first paragraph. You have to have something catchy. In trade writing, you can't just have a long, elaborate discursive argument over ten pages, it's got to be sprinkled with interesting examples. You've got to have neat quotes. You also can't go into too much detail, and so sometimes you've got to blur difficulties. Writing it that way took work. But I liked it, because it's just a different skill.

I will say, as a *Globe and Mail* columnist, they gave me a space of 800 words. When you write essays, you can usually be a couple hundred words over the word limit. If you're writing a newspaper column, you've got a certain amount of space on the page. And they're not going to add more paper at the bottom of the page. It's got to be the right length. I had about 800 words, and I

would write a first draft and it would be 1500 words, and then I would have to cut it down. And it would be way better at 800 words than it ever was at 1500. That is something that affected my writing. Even when I'm writing academic articles, I write something, and then I go through and I cut it down. And then I go through and I cut it down again. We academics put too many words in sentences, and they just clog it up. I find that undergraduate essays, they're twelve hundred words, and there's all sorts of stuff in there that doesn't add anything. It's padding.

**Noësis:** Has your writing process changed over time? When you were writing your most recent book, was the way you approached it different from when you were writing your earlier books?

**Hurka:** That was very different because it was a history of philosophy book. It was a huge amount of preparation. I took elaborate notes, because I was writing about 9 different philosophers. I had to remember what they all talked about, I had to have notes telling me where they all talked about this topic or that topic. I can't remember what the writing itself was like. I will say this: I'm older, I don't have the energy I once did. When I was in my twenties or thirties, I would wake up in the morning, and I might sit for an hour and a half writing. I would write however many hundred words, and then I'd quit. The way I've always worked is that I'll write in the morning, and then during the day, I'll think about how I should write the next part. When I wake up the next morning, I've got a rough idea of what I'm going to do. I'll go as far as I can, then I think about the next bit during the day. The change is that when I was younger, I might spend an hour and a half writing however many hundred words. Now, I do however many hundred words in much less time, but I still quit after the same amount. I'm, in a way, lazier. I'm more efficient, but that doesn't mean that I write for the same amount of time and do more.

**Noësis:** How long does it take you to write a book?

**Hurka:** A book can take six, or seven, or eight years, if you're doing other things at the same time. The *Perfectionism* book was based on my PhD dissertation at Oxford, from about 1980. The book was published in 1993. While I was working on that book, I wrote a lot of articles. Two-thirds of *Perfectionism* was on topics that weren't even discussed in the dissertation. You change your mind. You have an idea about how the book's going to go, and you realize it's wrong. You get a new idea, and you realize it's wrong. That just takes time. The mistake in what you've written doesn't appear the second you finish writing it, and the improvement doesn't occur to your right away. Taking a long time to write a book time is a good strategy. It gives you a lot of time to rethink things. You take some time to work on an article, and then you're looking at the book afresh. It hasn't been the main thing on your mind in the last six months, and you can see different things.

**Noësis:** You said earlier that you're an early riser. How early is early?

**Hurka:** Let me just say, I wish I could get up at six every morning. There are people who can only write at three in the morning. I'm the opposite. When I was a graduate student, I would wake up, make coffee, and start work. Then



I would go into the place all the other graduate students were, and I would have done a chunk of work for the day. They would all have been slouching around, and I would say “let’s go do this”, or “let’s go play a round of golf”. “No, no, no, I’ve got to work.”

If you work first thing in the morning, then it’s done, and you don’t spend the rest of the day worrying about how you haven’t done your work yet. I do that seven days a week. I never take a break from writing. Just a little bit every day. The tortoise not the hare. There are other people who can’t write, and then they just have a burst, and over a short space of time they produce a whole paper. I don’t do it that way, I probably couldn’t.

**Noësis:** Speaking of your most recent book, it’s on British ethicists. You studied at Oxford for a long time, so do you see yourself as a part of that tradition? If not, who do you see as your main philosophical influences?

**Hurka:** When I was in my undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I didn’t do much ethics. But I had the sense that I ought to cover all branches of philosophy, so in my fourth year, I took a seminar with Wayne Sumner on utilitarianism. He has been retired for a few years, but he was a leading moral philosopher in the department. You’ll fall over backwards when you hear this, but in those days the philosophy department had undergraduate seminars that could have a maximum of six students. This was a class with three students. One of them dropped out, and the other guy was a mail delivery guy who just happened to be taking the course. He wasn’t very philosophical, so I almost had a one-on-one seminar. The topic was utilitarianism, and Wayne Sumner had two people representing the opposition, for competing theories of what’s good. Representing the objectivist or perfectionist side, he had the last chapter of G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* from 1903, which I thought was just terrific. For deontology, he had the second chapter of W.D. Ross’ *The Right and the Good* from 1930, which I also thought was terrific. I liked their views, and I liked the way they did philosophy. It was analytic philosophy with no symbols.

Then I went to Oxford, and nobody was interested in that stuff. It wasn’t what was fashionable. But I always thought that it was a great period in the history of ethics. Some people figure out what’s hot, write on the current hot topic, and then when the next hot one comes along they write about that. That’s fine, but I would find it boring. I like things that haven’t been done before, so I had the idea of writing a book about moral philosophers of that period. The attraction was that I was going to be doing all this original analysis, it didn’t have a lot to do with my having gone to Oxford. Though, one of the philosophers’, H.H. Pritchard’s, letters are in the Bodleian library at Oxford. I must have been one of the first people who ever read them. He would write letters to his friend in the university mail, even though they were in colleges a stone’s throw apart. He would say, “just taking up the topic we were discussing driving to the golf course on the weekend”, and it was kind of fun reading their letters about that. But my initial attraction to those moral philosophers was from when I was in Toronto, and I think I would have always had it, whether I had gone to Oxford or not. I just liked the way they write about the subject.



They are kind of my philosophical heroes, at least in moral philosophy. They're much less influential than Aristotle, who is hopelessly overrated, and provides a totally misguided approach to ethics. And also than Kant, who is just as hopelessly misguided. I'm a contrarian. The people I think you should read in moral philosophy are people who are writing in the late 19th early 20th century. You just get messed up if you read Aristotle, and you get messed up if you read Kant.

**Noësis:** Is there anything specific you take issue with in Aristotle and Kant that you could share with us?

**Hurka:** Aristotle, like ancient Greek ethics, is ultimately egoistic. Your ultimate aim is your own *eudaimonia*. If you act virtuously towards other people, the explanation for why you ought to do that is ultimately that it will make your own life better. To me, that's just the wrong explanation. If you're in pain, then the reason I ought to make your pain go away isn't that that will make my life better, though it might. The reason is it makes your life better. That's something the philosophers in my book said. What makes something virtuous is how it cares about its object, which, in many cases, is other people. People who write about Aristotle deny all this, and say it's a terrible misinterpretation, but I think it's just correct. I have an obscurely published paper called "Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong", the idea being that virtually everything Aristotle says about virtue is mistaken.

Kant starts out by saying the only thing that's good without qualification is the good will. That's just false. The whole theory is supposed to come out of that, but it's just false. For instance, scientific understanding is good without qualification. Kant's arguments are terrible: "some knowledge is instrumentally bad and therefore no knowledge is intrinsically good". It's terrible. I have detailed things to say about what's wrong with Aristotle because I can actually read Aristotle, but it's unbearable to read Kant, although I have over time.

**Noësis:** You said you hadn't done much ethics until your fourth-year seminar. When did you decide that ethics was what you wanted to do?

**Hurka:** At that point. By the time I went to graduate school, which was the next fall, I was prepared to specialize in moral philosophy. You can imagine being turned on by a seminar in which you have a two-and-a-half-hour meeting once a week with just you and a professor. That was great, and Wayne Sumner was a great teacher, and I just liked the subject. To tell you the truth, this might have been a bit mercenary, but it was just obvious at the time that ethics was a coming side of the discipline. There'd been very little normative ethics, rather than metaethics, until 1970. It was now 1975, and you could see that it was a coming field. It's hard for people with PhDs to get jobs now, and it was as hard then, because there had been a big hiring boom at universities in the 1960s. They weren't hiring, because they were full-up with all these people from the 1960s. I thought it might be easier to get a job as a moral philosopher. It was a combination of a subject matter that captured my interest, and a sense of "this wouldn't be a bad thing from a career point of view", and it worked out.

**Noësis:** Speaking of how moral philosophy has developed over time, what do you see as the biggest changes you've observed? If you had to guess, where do you think the discipline is heading in the future?

**Hurka:** In the seventies, there was this turn towards normative ethics in other words, towards asking about what is right and wrong. Partly practical ethics; for instance, people were writing about abortion and reverse discrimination. People turned away from metaphysics for a while, which is asking about what we mean when we talk about right and wrong. Since then, metaethics has returned. Now there's this big world of metaethics, and it's become incredibly technical, and the number of views has proliferated, and how exactly they differ from one another has become harder to tell. It's become saturated with technical philosophy of language and technical metaphysics and technical epistemology. I've just never been very interested in that.

For normative ethics, in the 1970s the views that people considered were very simple. It often was, "should you care just about your own good, or should you care partially about everybody?" There's now a sense in the normative ethics world that an adequate account of morality has to be much more complicated. Take trolleyology, or the discussion of when it's ethically permissible to turn a trolley. In the seventies, the first trolley case was introduced. Now there are eighty-five variants, and you've got to have a view which says the right thing about all of them. In a way, extra complications being recognized is a good thing, but it makes the literature more intricate. On both sides, the metaethics side and the normative ethics side, the literature has gotten much more technical and specialized. Sometimes I think that it's necessary, and sometimes I think that it's overdone.

The range of applied ethics topics discussed has also changed. That's partly driven by what's happened in the world. When I was teaching applied ethics courses, one of the very first anthologies from the mid-1970s about contemporary moral problems had this really neat article about the ethics of war at the end. It was written by a Catholic in 1960, and it gave a very short, clearly written account of Just War Theory. I taught that in my courses at the University of Calgary, but nobody in philosophy was interested in the ethics of war. Then, in the 1980s, there was a resurgence in the nuclear arms race, and there was a lot of philosophy about U.S. nuclear weapons policy. That's an aspect of the morality of war, but a very specific one. The first Iraq war was in 1991, and suddenly people were discussing that article written in 1960. There started to be a literature about the morality of war, as it applies to conventional non-nuclear wars. And now, the ethics of war has gotten incredibly complicated. I wrote a paper about it in 2005, and people now write about the same aspect of just war theory, recognizing distinctions I hadn't dreamed of when I wrote about it. In political philosophy, there are more and more people writing about the ethics of immigration. In the nineties, there also started to be a literature in on nationalism, and that's become huge. The applied ethics topics have changed, and they'll probably continue to change, depending on what the world gives us to think about.



**Noësis:** Do you find, having studied in different areas, that moral philosophy is approached differently in different countries?

**Hurka:** It's hard to know the differences may be diminishing because people communicate through the internet much more with people in other countries. People also go to conferences much more than they did forty years ago. People fly from North America to Australia for a conference and then come back two days later, or vice versa. It used to be quite expensive and difficult to travel, and so people used to have local philosophy conferences. There used to be an Alberta philosophy conference, with just the Universities of Calgary, Alberta, and Lethbridge. In those days, people's circle of philosophical acquaintance was local, and small. Now, people fly all over the world, and they send each other papers over the internet. There's less differentiation by culture, nation, and location. It's in some ways a good thing, and in some ways a bad thing.

But there are still differences. What's hard to know is whether they're a matter of national culture, and how much they're a matter of the accidental influence of a certain person who happened to be in a certain place. Historically, Britain's public political life has been pretty consequentialist. When I was in Oxford as a graduate student in the seventies, utilitarianism was very current. The US, on the other hand, is a political culture based on rights. There was also this immense influence of John Rawls. In the eighties, political philosophy was all Rawls, all the time. That was less so in Britain. But how much of the huge influence of Rawls in the United States is due to the influence of his rights-based political philosophy that fits the political culture of the US, and how much is due to his influence as a particular person? As a personality, he was extremely influential on his students, and at Harvard he had all these great students.

In the past, Canada was much more British. When I was an undergraduate, there were more utilitarians in the philosophy department, like Danny Goldstick and Wayne Sumner. Now we have a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and we're somewhere in between Britain and the US. Canadians have also been very involved in the philosophical literature about nationalism and multiculturalism. That reflects the political history of this country. Philosophers in the United States tend to be skeptical of nationalism. They think it's what their government uses to justify invading and suppressing other countries. Nationalism is viewed more sympathetically by people in small countries, with big neighbours they think could threaten them. Israeli philosophers are sympathetic to nationalism, and Canadian philosophers are sympathetic to nationalism. In Canada, we've had a French speaking minority that we've cared about for a long time, and we've done a pretty good job of allowing immigrant communities to retain their distinctive character. Now we're grappling with the plight of Indigenous peoples in our culture. So, Canadian philosophers were among the first people writing about multiculturalism. Some philosophers who are against philosophical defenses of multiculturalism call it "the Canadian disease", because it's what all these "bad Canadian philosophers",



like Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, have foisted on the political philosophy world. There's something to the fact that people writing on a topic are affected by their countries' national histories, but it's becoming less the case because people interact internationally more often.

**Noësis:** You're a prolific author, and you've written on a bunch of different topics. By way of conclusion, is one of your papers a personal favorite, or is there something you'd like people to take a second look at?

**Hurka:** I hate to say it, but when I look back at them I often don't like the way they were written. Apart from that, I think most of them were pretty good. It wasn't original to me, but I wish people would read the account of virtue in *Virtue, Vice and Value*. It's an alternative to the dominant Aristotelean account of virtue, and I just think it's vastly better. That's the best thing to read. The Killam Lecture revisited some ideas about the value of knowledge and achievement from *Perfectionism*. I wouldn't say go back and read the chapters of *Perfectionism*, because they're too amateurishly and clunkily written, but those ideas are pretty good. If I had more energy I would now write a book about that again, but better and with changes.











"ALL TRUTH PASSES THROUGH THREE STAGES.  
FIRST, IT IS RIDICULED.  
SECOND, IT IS VIOLENTLY OPPOSED.  
THIRD, IT IS ACCEPTED AS BEING SELF-EVIDENT."

-ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

